



# In the Minority: Young Women & Breast Cancer



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## Younger Women and Breast Cancer: What the Statistics and Research Say

Breast cancer is often associated with older women. The latest **statistics** on breast cancer show that 83% of breast cancer cases occur in women over 50 years old. In fact, age is a risk factor of developing breast cancer, with one's risk increasing the older one gets. The **rates** of breast cancer increase after 40 years old and peak at 70 years old.



While this means that the majority of women diagnosed with breast cancer are older, it does not mean that only older women are diagnosed with breast cancer. Rates of breast cancer cases in women **younger than 50 years** old are low, but they exist. In 2017, it was reported that around 20% of all newly diagnosed cases of breast cancer occurred in women younger than 50 years old. The rates for women under 40 show that around 5.4% of breast cancer cases occur in women younger than 40 years old.

### **Unique challenges of being younger**

These low rates alone mean that younger women who do get diagnosed with breast cancer are an underrepresented population. Unfortunately, being underrepresented is not the only challenge young women with breast cancer face. Simply being younger and diagnosed with breast cancer comes with its own host of challenges. Some of the **unique challenges** faced by younger women with breast cancer include, but are **not limited to**:

- Higher rates of psychosocial issues such as depression, anxiety, stress, body image concerns, and social isolation
- Pregnancy concerns and fertility issues
- Early menopause
- Sexual dysfunction and intimacy issues
- Financial instability from being early in their careers and/or the cost of cancer

***Rates of breast cancer cases in women younger than 50 years old are low, but they exist.***



- Increased stress from coping with and starting an intimate relationship
- Caring for a younger family
- A survey of 547 young Canadian women diagnosed with breast cancer found that many of them had a hard time with the healthcare system as well as with finding same-aged peers with breast cancer

## Other statistics and facts

Younger women with breast cancer face other unique issues outside of the psychological, social, sexual, and financial challenges mentioned above. Various aspects of a breast cancer diagnosis in younger women also seem to differ from older women. This is evident from the following:

- Due to the tumour's biology, younger women may need different ways to manage their cancer
- Breast cancer is the **most diagnosed** cancer in women 20 to 49 years old
- Younger women with breast cancer have **lower rates** of survival
- Women younger than 40 years old die from breast cancer **more than any other type** of cancer
- Younger women may ignore symptoms of breast cancer because they think they are too young to have breast cancer
  - Healthcare professionals may also **ignore symptoms** of breast cancer in younger women for the same reason, which may be one of the reasons why breast cancer is usually **diagnosed at a later stage** in younger women



- Breast cancer in younger women is usually **more aggressive**
- Due to denser breast tissue than older women, diagnosing breast cancer in younger women with **routine mammograms** may not be effective

## **Resources and self-advocacy**

Since the majority of breast cancer cases occur in women over 50 years old, many resources address this age group and are not specifically geared towards the unique challenges that younger women with breast cancer face. If you are a young woman who has been diagnosed with breast cancer, here are a few resources to get you started:

### *Never Too Young: Psychosocial Information and Support for Young Women with Breast Cancer*

*Never Too Young* is CBCN's handbook for young women with breast cancer. It deals with the psychosocial aspects of breast cancer.

### *PYNK Program*

PYNK is run by experienced health care professionals and young breast cancer survivors. It exists to address the clinical, psychological, research





and educational needs of younger women with breast cancer.

### *Rethink Breast Cancer*

Rethink is “the young women’s breast cancer movement”. Rethink educates, empowers and advocates for people worldwide who are affected by breast cancer through boldfaced campaigns, content, programs, and resources.

### *Young Survival Coalition (YSC)*

Young Survival Coalition strengthens the community, addresses the unique needs, amplifies the voice, and improves the quality of life of young adults affected by breast cancer, locally, nationally and internationally.

### *Young Adult Cancer Canada (YACC)*

Young Adult Cancer Canada’s mission is to support young adults living with, through, and beyond cancer. Its mission is to be the connection to peers, bridge out of isolation, and a source of inspiration.





# To the Girl Standing in the Blue Hospital Gown, Part 1

*by Robyn Goldman*



**Day 1: October 21, 2021 | 11:07 am**

Well, the results are in.

Take a seat.

Take a deep breath.

It's positive.

Your world is going to change with all the appointments and treatments coming, but just know that you can handle anything. If 2020 and 2021 has taught you anything, it's that you're tough as nails.

Right now, nothing makes sense and you're still trying to understand all this. How do you tell people? Should you even tell people? How will your family and friends handle this? Your boyfriend - or not? Your job? The list goes on.



Right now, you're probably angry. Angry because you knew. You knew even when you went to the doctor months ago and were told not to worry about it. When you were told that because you're young and you have no family history, it's nothing to worry about. Allow yourself to be angry. Grieve. It's all part of the process. So is feeling scared and sad. Strangely, I also feel apologetic. I don't know why I feel apologetic, but I do. While I continue to process what the fuck is happening, I am sure I'll experience all the other emotions.

### **Day 12: November 1, 2021**

I found out that the tumour is 1.2 cm. I'm lucky, and even though it feels like a marble to me, it's small and it hasn't grown. My surgery is scheduled for day 28. Once that is complete, then I'll have to wait for two weeks to find out more about my diagnosis and more about what kind of little monster is living inside of me. From my understanding, if it's not genetic, then it's environmental (right?). I'm choosing to see the glass as half full. I'm going to come out of this, albeit with much shorter hair, but I will be stronger, wiser, kinder, and softer. I know that

***You knew even when you went to the doctor months ago and were told not to worry about it. When you were told that because you're young and you have no family history, it's nothing to worry about.***



I'm going to have really shitty days. They say chemo is like the worst tequila hangover, EVER! And I swore off tequila years ago but I'm ready. I can do this.

### **Day 13: November 2, 2021**

In two weeks, my world has gone from “normal” to “a new kind of normal”. I still wake up. I still brush my teeth. I still go to work and engage with my peers. Believe it or not, life hasn't stopped.

After being diagnosed with breast cancer, I didn't know what to expect. The kindness and the support that has been shown to me is overwhelming and I am flooded with emotions. I joined Rethink Breast Cancer's Facebook group. My first post was, “I'm scared. I'm alone. I don't know what questions to ask. I have no idea how to navigate this.” From the responses and from the posts of other women in the group, I could see that I wasn't the only one. There's more of me. More boobs, although some are missing their boobs. More scars. More tears. More families. More stories. More support. In such a short period of time I have joined a new kind of sorority. To be honest, joining a group was at the bottom of my list but the messages of love hit differently and are welcomed.

### **Day 17: November 6, 2021**

In my journal this week I was asked to “write down something that at this moment in your life you are grateful for”. My answer was that I am grateful to live in Canada, and for many reasons. While “The True North” is far from perfect, I will never take for granted how lucky I am. From the day I went to the ER because I was concerned about a lump, to the ultrasounds that same day, the staff that

attended to me were amazing. I got a biopsy, mammogram, and an MRI, and the only thing I have had to pay so far was two \$13 parking fees and a \$30 parking ticket. Apparently, there's no preferred parking for cancer patients. I asked.

My surgery is scheduled in a week from now, and I'm not scared. Nor worried. I'm excited. It's weird to use that word 'excited' in a situation like this because it has a positive meaning behind it, but I'm using it to mean that I'm ready. As the leaves change from greens to reds and yellows to prepare for winter, the most incredible thing is that next spring they'll come back the same, but different; more mature, brighter, stronger. Reborn (I should have paid more attention to science when I was younger to explain this better). I'm like the trees; I'll come back the same, but different. Reborn. Ready. Brighter, stronger. I am going to listen to my soul and my intuition. When my body needs rest during treatments and after surgery, I'll respect it. But I'm going to push myself a little because I know I have it in me. I'm already counting down the days till I ring the bell at Princess Margaret.

*It's weird to use that word 'excited' in a situation like this because it has a positive meaning behind it, but I'm using it to mean that I'm ready.*



*I have so many questions, but when you don't know anything about something, where the hell are you supposed to start?*

### **Day 24: November 13, 2021**

I spoke to the doctor yesterday because I am nervous and filled with anxiety. I'm hanging on by a thread and my emotions are changing by the minute. He confirmed that the cancer I have is triple negative. It doesn't sound good, because it's not good. I asked him to give it to me straight and he said that this type of breast cancer kind of sucks as this type of cancer is the most aggressive but there's a lot of data and new treatments. Fuck.

I have so many questions, but when you don't know anything about something, where the hell are you supposed to start?

While nothing is confirmed, he told me that I will be getting chemo treatment and radiation. Those things I assumed and anticipated but when he confirmed it for the second time, I feel like it just hit me harder. Damn it. I'm pretty upset. I'm angry. I'm still processing. I am scared too. Scared of chemo and scared of losing my hair. We're so selective of what we share on the internet. Out of the 10 pictures taken in the same pose, we decide which one looks the best for our followers, for our image and for our self-confidence. We make decisions on which one we think will get the most likes. We're all guilty of this. I grew up on the stage, dancing and cheering. Now, at work, I'm the first person people see when they walk into the office. This

world can be superficial and a lot of one's worth is put in to how one looks. It's a crappy reality and I will be forced to challenge that after chemo and potentially losing my hair.

November 17 is the day I will add two new scars to my body and that will likely not be the end of it. Once the full report comes back of what my actual treatment will be, there'll probably be even more scars. But those can all be covered up; what can't be covered is everything else. Yes, there are wigs, scarves, hats, etc. to cover your head but how can one really prepare for the reality of losing your hair? I know that some may say it's too early to worry about this and that I shouldn't think about it until it happens but every time I wash my hair or put on mascara, I wonder about how many more times I'll get to do this. I know that my value is not in my hair, my looks, my body, or in how people perceive me but there's nothing wrong with being sexy and confident in your appearance.



# **“It’s Probably Nothing”: Getting Breast Cancer in My 30s**

*by Stacey Katsuras*





It all started in July 2021. A drop of bloody nipple discharge led me down the rabbit hole of Google and WebMD which, for once, was actually reassuring – it's usually harmless. I scheduled an appointment with my doctor the following day who shared the same sentiment – it's probably nothing, but I will refer you to a breast clinic just in case. As a 30-year-old with no family history of breast cancer and a couple of benign fibroadenomas, I wasn't too worried, and neither was my Surgical Oncologist initially; the odds were in my favour, it was likely benign. And so I attended my ultrasound, mammogram, and biopsy appointments – each

***As a 30-year-old with no family history of breast cancer and a couple of benign fibroadenomas, I wasn't too worried, and neither was my surgical oncologist.***



time observing how the other women in the waiting room were decades older than me.

The results were in and I was once again assured that it was probably benign, but since it was symptomatic, I should get it surgically removed with a lumpectomy. It turns out I was against the odds. Pathology reports revealed that it was ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS; stage 0 breast cancer) and the margins were positive, meaning more of the tumour was likely still present. It took some time to process this and begin considering my options only to have my MRI results show that the remaining tumour was actually extensive, and the only treatment option would be a complete unilateral mastectomy.

At this point, I knew to brace myself for all appointments going forward – especially ones where they actually allow you to bring a loved one for support in the middle of a pandemic.

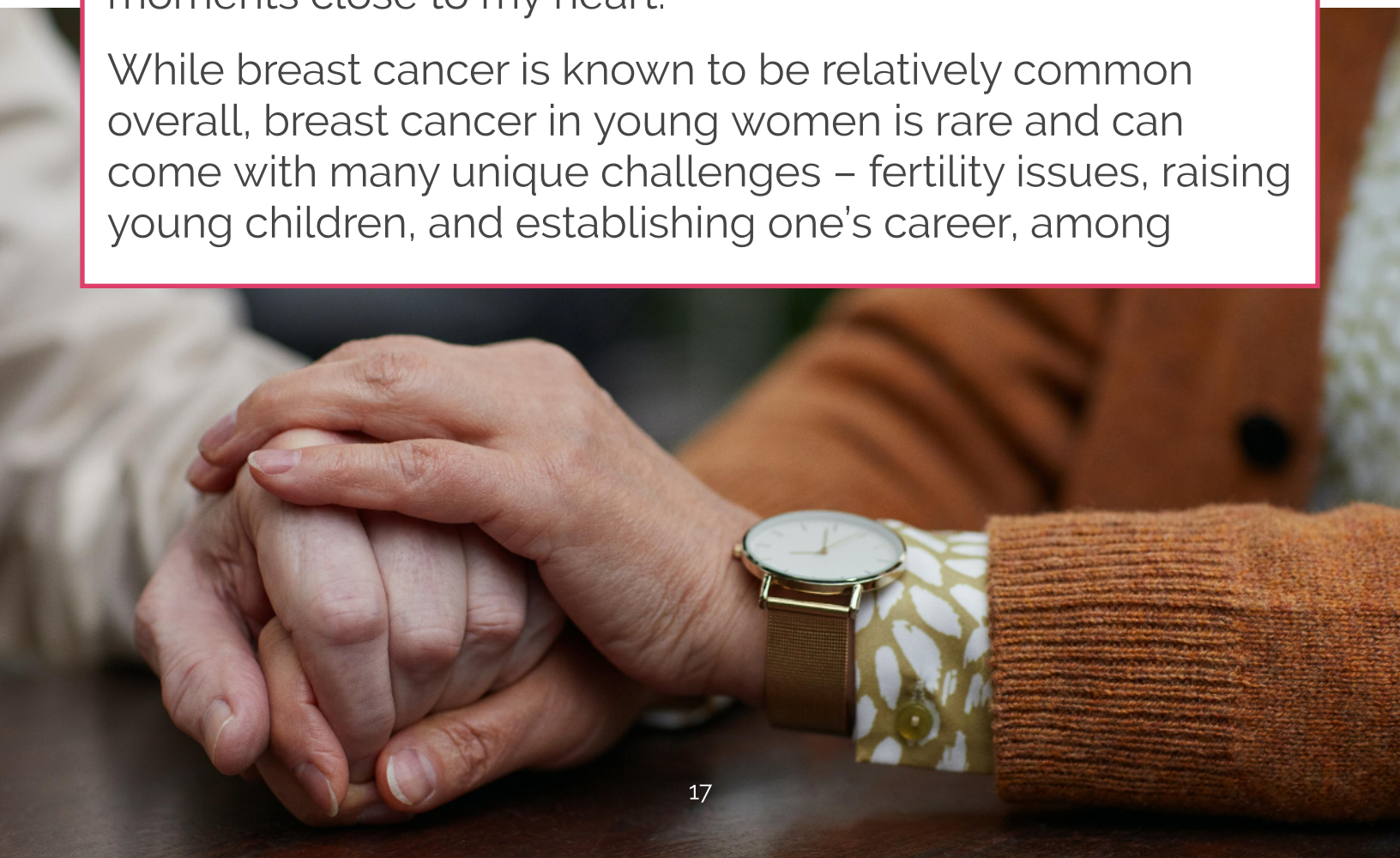
As it turned out, the tumour they removed in the mastectomy demonstrated signs of being invasive (upgrade to stage 1), but my lymph node was clear (thank God). The next step would be 5 years of hormone therapy to prevent recurrence and while this was relatively good news overall (no chemo), it was a lot to take in for my husband and I who were thinking of starting a family in the near future and would now have to put that off. Even though fertility was never really mentioned because “I am young”, we advocated for ourselves and scrambled to squeeze in two quick cycles of egg retrieval/IVF – the fastest \$30k we ever spent, but worth every penny to hold onto hope for our future.

I have never experienced as much emotion in such a short amount of time as the last 8 months – from anger, sadness, exhaustion, and anxiety, to gratitude, calmness, and hope.

This journey has not been easy for me or my family. Every step of the way has felt like a confusing waiting game, and the news seemed to be getting progressively worse.

As the anxiety and the fear grew, so did the support from those around me. Getting showered with so much love, prayer, and kindness has filled me with overwhelming gratitude. While it can sometimes be hard to see when you are in the midst of a storm, now that things have calmed down, I look around and see so much in my life to be grateful for. And besides, I now have battle scars to serve as a daily reminder to live each day to the fullest – to soak up time with the ones I love and to keep life's special moments close to my heart.

While breast cancer is known to be relatively common overall, breast cancer in young women is rare and can come with many unique challenges – fertility issues, raising young children, and establishing one's career, among

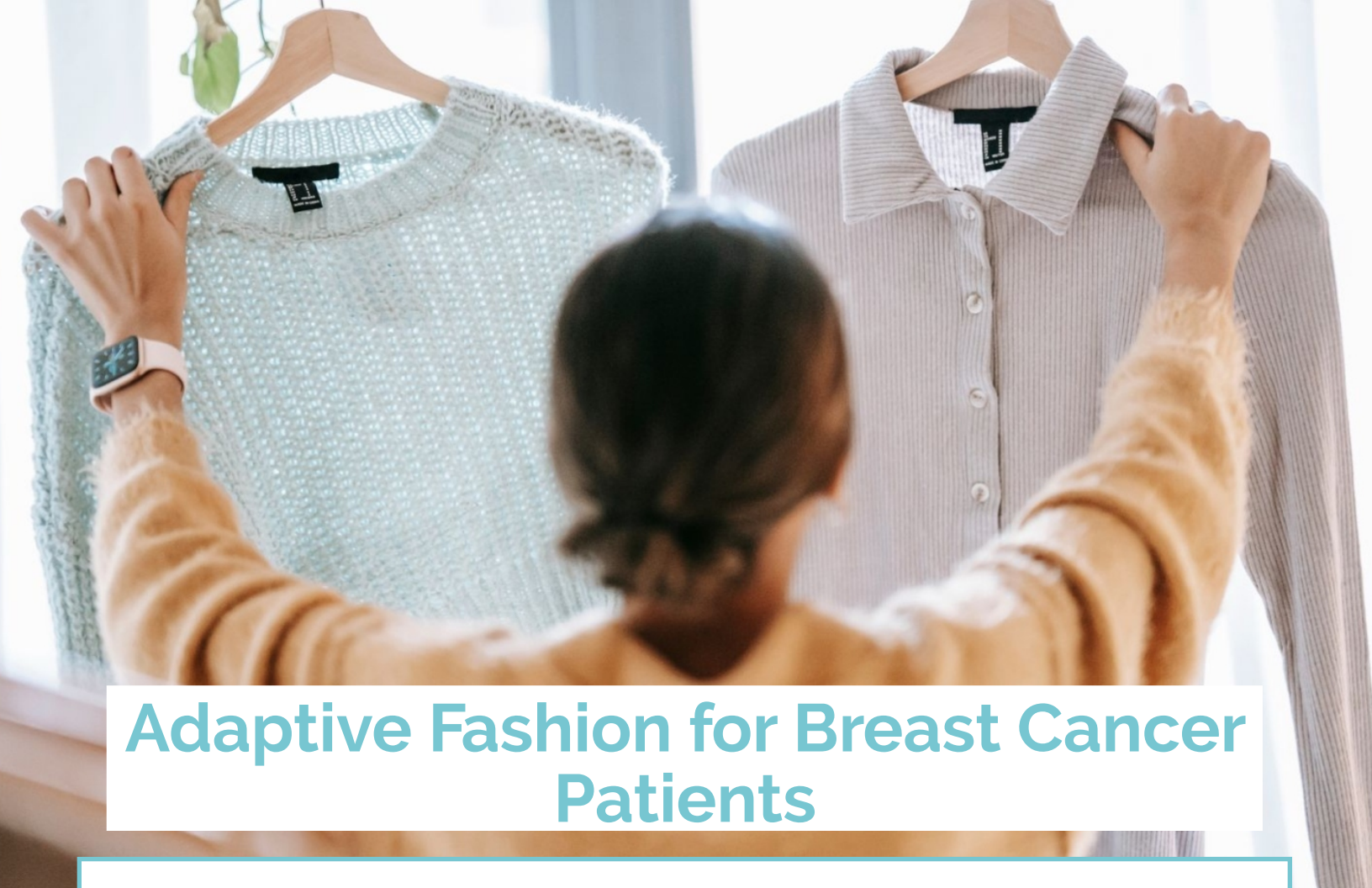




***While breast cancer is known to be relatively common overall, breast cancer in young women is rare and can come with many unique challenges***

others. Worse yet, if diagnosed at a later stage, the chances of survival are drastically reduced, making early detection imperative. I am so incredibly thankful that I became symptomatic and that I took my symptoms seriously. I encourage all of the women in my life to be aware of their body, to check their breasts, to talk to their healthcare providers, to research, to ask questions, and to advocate for themselves when needed.

Month 1 of hormone therapy is complete – I never imagined that I'd have the menopause experience in my 30s, but here we are. Others have managed and so will I.



## Adaptive Fashion for Breast Cancer Patients

Breast cancer and its various treatments can change your body in many ways: weight gain or loss, tenderness, lymphedema (swelling in the limbs), partial or complete mastectomies, prosthetic breasts. This might mean that your old or favorite clothing may not fit, or fit properly any longer, and it can be difficult to find outfits that you can feel good in. It may be time to have a heart-to-heart with your closet, and explore some of the options for comfortable, adaptive clothing that can make you feel confident and excited about getting dressed again. When the adaptive clothing market began around 40 years ago, the initial focus was mainly seniors in long-term care homes who required help getting dressed. Now, however, adaptive clothing has gone more mainstream, making it easier to find fashionable and comfortable clothing to fit the needs of those with breast cancer.

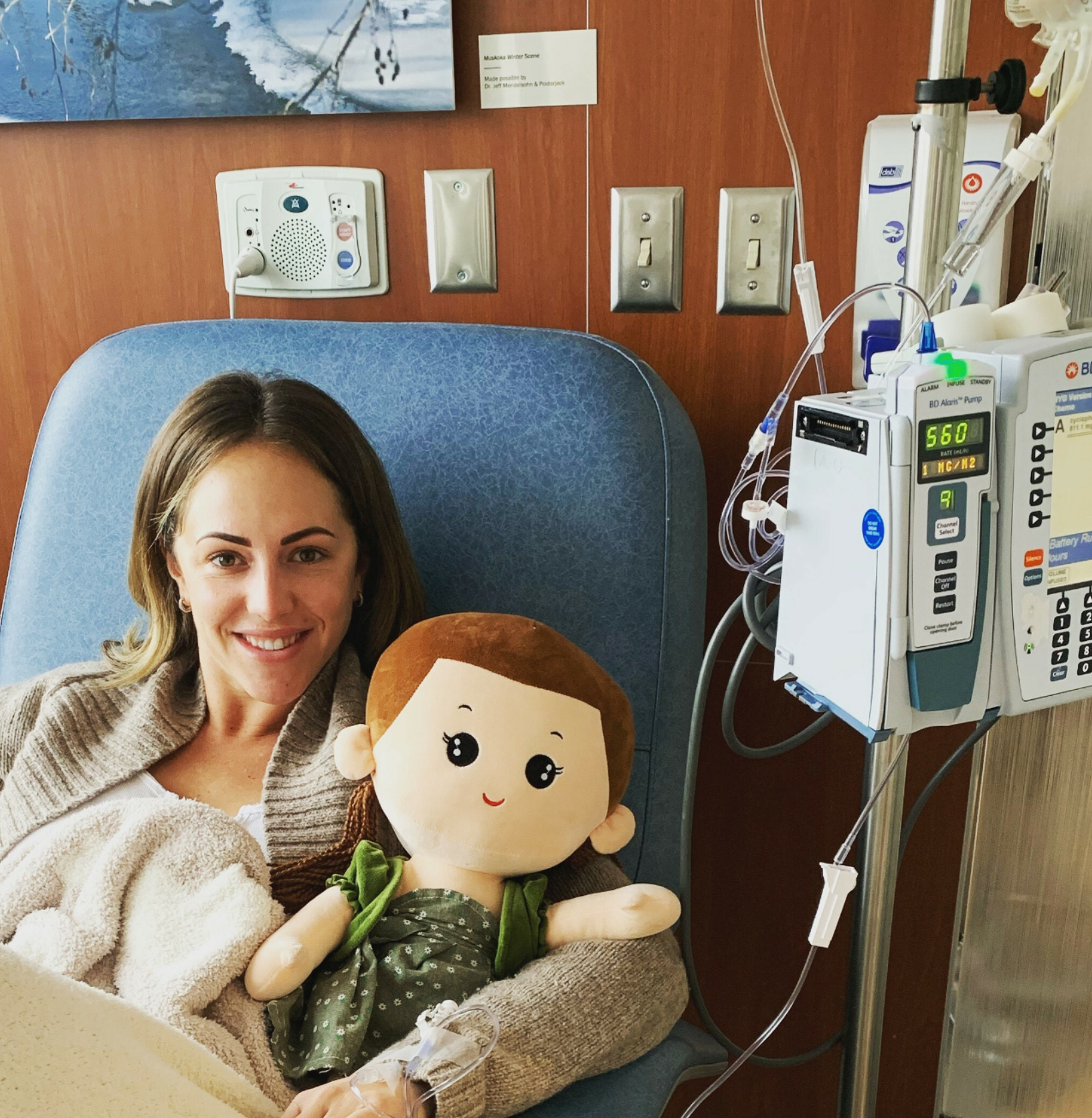


If you are unsure what sort of clothing you may need, start by evaluating what you already own. Underwire bras should be avoided until all tenderness is gone, and any surgeries have fully healed. If you are really attached to a certain piece of clothing, it may be possible to have it altered to flatter your new shape. Check with local tailors to see which items could be adapted. When shopping, opt for soft or stretchy fabrics and ensure that the cut and fit doesn't interfere with any post-surgery accessories, like drains or expanders. Be aware of "strategic seams"; seams which cross over sensitive areas and may rub or cause discomfort, especially if the garment is snug or form-fitting.

Tommy Hilfiger's [Tommy Adaptive](#) line, [With Grace B. Bold](#), [Care+Wear](#), [LymphedIVAS](#), and [Cancer be Glammed](#) are some examples of modern lines of adaptive wear. Products include post-operative bras, compression garments with flair, and clothing that is stylish, but can also accommodate drains and bandages while being easy to wear. Many options are available that feature hidden pockets for post-surgery accessories.

Thrift stores and consignment shops are also a great way to experiment with new styles of clothing to see what works for you without too much financial investment. You can try before you buy as opposed to online shopping. Sometimes, however, a different wardrobe may not be enough to make you feel comfortable; [Look Good Feel Better](#) specializes in giving women the tools and resources to regain a sense of self and renew their feelings of womanhood, however those women see to define it. They offer online and in-person workshops ranging from wigs and hair alternatives to breast health, skincare, and cosmetics. Don't be afraid to try new things; be flexible with your body changes and find looks that are





## To the Girl Standing in the Blue Hospital Gown, Part 2

*by Robyn Goldman*



## **Day 42: December 1, 2021**

I'm okay.

I'm still scared and I'm still nervous, but I'm okay. I'm finding a sense of peace and calmness in all of this chaos. These past 42 days have been life-changing. Being diagnosed and the end of a relationship have really tested my ability to find acceptance in everything. I continue to smile and laugh; life is truly incredible. The universe works in ways that I'll never fully understand and in the darkest moments there is still light to be found.

At first, I was on a different journey, and I didn't feel safe. I had no answers to the questions I had and there was no one to guide me. That's when everything changed. It's true what they say about people coming into your life for reasons that we may never know. My angel, Ada, who I owe so much to, encouraged me to ask questions. This led to me, just days before I was supposed to have surgery, getting a second opinion. Besides being one of my dearest friends, Esmeé is my sister for life, and she introduced me to my new team at North York General where I will be getting treatment moving forward. Never having faced anything like this before, you don't know where to start, what to ask, and how to navigate the situation. All the advice from friends and groups are great, but you just don't know how to filter it all. The team at North York General helped me with this as they took me from my lowest point and have now given me hope. My heart is full of gratitude for the people who have shown me love and support. I literally owe my life to so many people. I feel safe now. I feel calm. I have answers. My future is bright. I am exactly

*This is what  
I anticipated  
to be the  
most  
dreaded  
part of  
cancer.*

where I'm supposed to be. I am motivated and stronger than ever. I feel empowered to get up every day, to put on my damn lipstick and to do what needs to be done, regardless. I have no choice and I have to show up for myself. Because this is it. I'm here and I have nowhere else to go, I can't run or hide from it. Cancer has not taken my life away from me. In fact, it is the opposite; cancer has shown me what life truly is.

**Day 47: December 6, 2021**

It's here.

Chemotherapy. Besides the unknown, this is what I anticipated to be the most dreaded part of cancer. So many questions about chemo ran through my mind when I found out that I was positive for breast cancer. How will I feel? Will it hurt? What will be the side effects? What will the chemo room look like?

Now, the silence in the room is masked by the beeping of the machines and the rain hitting the windows. The weather seemed appropriate, given the circumstances.





However, there's still brightness and I am one step closer to finishing treatment and getting to ring the bell.

### **Day 55: December 14, 2021**

It's been 8 days since the dreaded Red Devil. That is the nickname for the first part of the chemotherapy that I am receiving. What a terrible nickname for a treatment that is supposed to save your life. Cancer has garbage PR in my opinion.

Current check-in – I feel good. I didn't know what to expect and I was hit hard after my first round. I'm a warrior, but I'm not a superhero. I am going to take the meds that my healthcare team has told me to take, and I will listen to my body, while still pushing myself a little. I feel pretty freaking good. Bring it on, but please be gentle. I have a big bark, but a very little bite.

Today I packed my hair stuff away. That was hard. I know people say, "it's just hair" but is it? Really?

Every day we wake up and look in the mirror, we see a reflection of ourselves, of who we are. For me, my hair is more than just hair, it's part of my identity and part of the reflection I see, and I don't think admitting that is a bad

thing. I'm going to miss it a lot. I'm going to miss spending time in the shower while my conditioner sits for 10 minutes, way past the recommended 3 to 5 minutes. I'm going to miss going to the salon for 6 hours and swapping stories about love (and betrayal), work and family. I'm going to miss walking out of the salon feeling like the sexiest woman out there. Right now, no one knows I'm sick. I don't wear a badge or a button that says I have cancer but once that hair goes, it's like you're branded. You now have cancer, and everyone knows it. I've been holding my own, but this is when cancer and I will go toe-to-toe. I'm going to have to really give it my all, but I'm scared and I'm sad. What will I see in that new reflection? Will I recognize her?

One last blow dry for now.

**Day 63: December 22, 2021**

It's gone.

It had to go.

It was time.





I don't completely recognize the girl in the mirror. She seems familiar. She seems a little sad and scared. We have so much to learn from each other. I showered today for the first time since shaving my head, letting the water run over me where my hair once was and down my body. My powerful body. My strong and resilient body. Then I got out and continued the rest of my routine as I normally would. I take the body aches, muscle pain, hair loss, and fatigue to mean that my treatment is working. I am so close I can see it. I've started manifesting what my life will look like after all this is done. It's a bright and simple life filled with love and gratitude.

**Day 71: December 30, 2021**

Today is my birthday; 34 years young. To be honest, I've never really been much of a fan of my birthday, but this year is different. This year I am going to think about why I love my birthday and reflect on the past year. This year has been one for the books, arguably the hardest one yet, from love and betrayal to a diagnosis that will

*Today is my birthday; 34 years young. To be honest, I've never really been much of a fan of my birthday, but this year is different.*

forever change my life. Despite all this, I am still finding so much beauty around me and I'm finding so much to be grateful for.

This year for my birthday I am celebrating my life, my journey, and the people in my life.

To my family and my friends, you continued to pick me up when I was down. You helped me see my worth when I was blind. You were my legs when I couldn't stand. You were my voice when I didn't know what to say. Today, I am celebrating you as much as I am celebrating me. You have given me my light back and you have shown me unconditional love and support.

To my pink sisters, I am celebrating for us today. I am celebrating those who can continue to celebrate, but mostly, I am celebrating and honoring those who can no longer celebrate. You'll always be celebrated. One birthday wish of mine is that we all see the beauty in our journey and our legacy.

To me, today is a day of rebirth. It's also the end of a year and the beginning of a new one. Today is the day where I choose to celebrate me, recognize how far I have come, remember the challenges I have faced, and acknowledge what motivates me. While I have come a long way, I have a lot left in my journey and my light will only get brighter. Today I woke up



and had cake for breakfast, received beautiful flowers from a friend I haven't seen in a long time, logged onto work, and simply just smiled.

I am exactly where I am meant to be.

I am proud of Robyn vol. 34 but really excited to see Robyn vol. 35.



# Testing Saved My Life

*by Adriana Ernter*



When I was five, I fell from the top of the swing set in my backyard and onto my right side, breaking my elbow. Why I was hanging upside down from the top bar unsupervised I don't know, but it's safe to say I was copying my older sister and playmates. Even back then I was super competitive. If someone else was doing something, I had to prove I could do it too. My stubbornness resulted in a sling and a hot and itchy cast that I wore and endured (not quietly) for the entire summer. The swing-set incident left me with a double-jointed elbow that in later years became a nemesis to my synchronized swimming coaches who would holler at me from the pool deck to straighten and tighten my right arm, which being double-jointed and all was not an easy feat...but more about synchro later.

The point I'm making is that testing—which when I was a five-year-old wannabe trapeze artist included a series of X-rays to rule out skull fractures and confirm the broken elbow, resulting in resetting my bones and the aforementioned cast—is crucial to survival. Period. Particularly when it comes to breast cancer. So it only seems logical that as a breast cancer survivor I'm more than a little frustrated the **Canadian Task Force on Preventive Health Care** is recommending clinicians and hospitals decrease women's access to life-saving breast cancer tests.

### **Updates on breast cancer screening**

According to the Canadian Task Force guidelines, the new



recommendation for breast cancer testing for women ages 50 to 69 years is one mammogram every two to three years as opposed to its current status of one every year. Additional testing like ultrasounds and MRIs are now deemed unnecessary unless otherwise approved by a doctor. And if you're younger than 50, you can forget about having any testing, unless you have a family history of breast cancer and/or are exhibiting symptoms of the disease.

The rationale is that testing (or screening as it's called in the guideline), leads to over-diagnosis, results in unnecessary treatment of cancer that would not have caused harm in a woman's lifetime and has physical and psychological consequences from false positives. Personally, if my doctors told me I'd been incorrectly diagnosed



through a “false positive,” the only consequence would be sore facial muscles from smiling and maybe a margarita hangover. Any woman I've ever spoken with has said, no matter the outcome, she wants to know and has the right to know if she has cancer.

### **Survey says...**

In 2019, a national U.S. [survey](#) was taken through [cancer.net](#), asking Americans about their thoughts on cancer. Six out of 10 people said they are concerned about developing cancer, while a 2017 [Avon Worldwide survey](#) stated that the World Health Organization estimates that breast cancer kills more than 500,000 women around the world every year.

Astounding right? Considering most doctors will tell you that breast cancer is one of the better cancers to be diagnosed with, although only in the early stages I-II, as so many scientific advancements have been made. This is where I thank bigwig companies, such as Avon, Estée Lauder, CIBC and Proctor & Gamble for stepping up. Their tireless support, research and education provides so much information, like the Avon survey that lists the World Health Organization as saying that the annual half-million deaths could be greatly reduced if cancer were detected at an earlier stage.

The words that stand out here for me are twofold. First, “could be,” because the [Canadian Cancer Society](#) lists breast cancer as the second leading cause of death from cancer in women with an average of 75 women diagnosed, while another 14 women die from breast cancer every day.

Second, “greatly reduced if cancer were detected at an earlier stage.” This statement is affirmed in a special report documented by the Canadian Cancer Society and the Government of Canada in 2018, where it states that more than 80% of female breast cancers that have been diagnosed at an early stage (I or II), have most likely been found as a result of early detection through breast cancer screening.

I'm one of this 80%. Thanks to five mammograms, seven ultrasounds and three MRIs and counting, (I'm high-risk now, so tested every three months) I've been cancer-free for one year.

### **Background check**

I grew up in Calgary, Alberta where the sky is blue, the air is clean and swing-set bars should not be hung upside-down from.

When I was 15, I became sick with what my parents thought was a terrible flu, so my mom drove me to the hospital. After what felt like a million tests, I had emergency surgery. Turns out, I didn't have the flu. The doctors found and removed a grapefruit-sized cyst off my left ovary and fallopian tube.

Now, you would think that at five foot six inches, rail thin and weighing 96 pounds soaking wet, I would have seen the lump bulging against my lower abdomen, but I didn't. Luckily the cyst was benign and was removed before it ruptured and spread toxic fluid throughout my body. Because of this, my age, the size of the cyst and the complete randomness of its presence, I was an anomaly at



the hospital. Swarms of doctors came by my bed each day to read my chart, talk amongst themselves and congratulate the surgeon who had the foresight to order the ultrasound that detected the cyst. Two months later, I was back to normal and in the pool. Two years later, I had more flu-like symptoms, so I had an ultrasound, which found another cyst in almost the exact same spot. It was smaller than the first, but again, present in my body without rhyme or reason. It was removed and life carried on.

I graduated high school, took a gap year modeling for companies like Beeman's Gum, Mountain Magic and the Calgary Herald, and answered the telephone at my retail job with the store's mandated greeting "happy paddling, Beaver Canoe." Later, after two years of studying at the University of Calgary to become a translator while swimming my way towards certification as a national-level synchronized swimming coach, I applied to and was one of



120 students out of 3,500 applicants accepted into the University of Ryerson's Radio & Television Arts program in Toronto. I packed a suitcase and moved.

Coaching national-level synchronized swimmers 20 hours a week (along with slinging suede skirts and leather car coats at Danier on Sundays), I paid my way through a four-year Bachelor of Applied Arts degree in three years. I graduated, got my first, second and third jobs until six years and an associate television producer's title later, I went back to University where I spent five nights a week absorbing everything I could about magazine publishing. Then, starting on the bottom rung once again, I wrote my way to becoming a senior writer and editor for magazines and newspapers like Salon, FASHION, Flare, Chatelaine, Childview, Figure Skater Fitness, National Post and more.

### **Testing, testing 1, 2, 3**

Everything was going great (minus a painfully sad divorce... but that's another story), until I felt a lump under my right armpit while I was on assignment in Amman, Jordan. I knew it shouldn't be there, but in contrast to the stories I was capturing about displaced children living in refugee camps, worrying about a lump felt self-indulgent.

Once back in Toronto I had it checked out. My family doctor sent me to a specialist at a downtown breast clinic where I filled out the necessary breast cancer forms, my every answer failing Cancer Care Ontario's requisites for preliminary screening. I could not check the boxes that would determine I qualified for a mammogram, ultrasound, or MRI.



No, I was not 50 years or older.

No, I did not have a family history of breast cancer.

No, I was not like Angelina Jolie and a carrier for the BRCA1 gene, or even the BRCA2 gene, which are mutations that may increase my risk for breast cancer. (Okay, so the form doesn't actually mention Angelina Jolie, but since she was super public about having BRCA1 complete with undergoing a mastectomy, as far as pop culture goes she's as synonymous with breast cancer as she is with Brad Pitt, wearing vials of blood as jewelry, and having inappropriate PDA with her brother.)

No, I did not have pain, discoloration, or swelling in either of my breasts.

No, I had not had radiation therapy before the age of 30 or a minimum of 8 years ago.

No, I had never been tested positive for any type of cancer.

When I handed in the forms, the doctors looked at me like I shouldn't be there. Then they stood in a clump in the hallway, three feet from me

***No, I was not  
50 years or  
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No, I did not  
have a  
family  
history of  
breast  
cancer.***

reading the information and talking. They didn't think I needed testing. But I did.

I may not have been lying face down in the grass in my parents' back yard or fading in and out of foggy unconsciousness in the children's wing of a Calgary hospital, but I'd been down this road before and I was adamant the hard, pea-sized lump residing in my armpit had to go. After all, if the bumps and breaks of my past had proved anything, like Molly Bloom in Molly's Game, I could not, would not be killed easily. At least not when I could have access to the right tests and care.

### **Breast cancer is sneaky**

You see the tricky thing about breast cancer is that it's random. You can't blame it on smoking and drinking your way through your 20s. (I asked.) You also can't point the finger at your deodorant/antiperspirant choices, sugar consumption, lack of children, or any other medical myth that has floated through cyberspace. The evidence is just not there. While your DNA can push you to the front of the line and daily stress, environmental pollution, later marriages and childbirth are areas being researched, the hard reality is: breast cancer is sneaky and an early diagnosis can be your biggest savior.

***When I handed in the forms, the doctors looked at me like I shouldn't be there... They didn't think I needed testing. But I did.***

An early diagnosis also makes good fiscal sense. According to the [European Journal of Cancer](#) a lifetime diagnosis of stage I breast cancer in Canada costs approximately \$23,275, as opposed to \$36,340 for stage IV or metastatic cancer. Considering anyone can be a potential candidate, much like me and the broken elbow, the ovarian cysts and the armpit lump, testing is critical.

Recently, I signed a [petition](#) through [Dense Breasts Canada](#), to advocate for just that. I want ageless access to mammograms, ultrasounds, MRIs and more. And more importantly, just like you and every other woman living on this planet, I deserve to receive the screening I need at whatever age I feel most appropriate for my body to ensure I am breast cancer-free for the rest of my life.



A close-up portrait of a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, smiling gently at the camera. She is wearing a white halter-neck top and a gold chain necklace with heart-shaped pendants. The background is a soft, out-of-focus indoor setting.

## Breast Cancer at 36

*By Tirzah Cooper*

My name is Tirzah Cooper. I am a 36-year-old mother of two, Vayda (17) and Mason (12). I live in Saskatoon with the love of my life, my fiancé. Up until my recent diagnosis I was working full time for almost five years for a reconstructive plastic surgeon, and I also ran my own photography business in my spare time.

I had a few benign tumors (fibroadenomas) that I would check every six months via ultrasound, and I had one lump which was classified as benign and was told it was nothing to worry about. Three months after my last ultrasound, this lump grew very quickly and became painful. I went back for another ultrasound three months earlier than suggested, and it showed the lump was changing and growing extremely fast. I had a biopsy on June 8, 2022.

I had a bad feeling from the moment I first saw the image of my lump while getting an ultrasound; I knew it wasn't good from the way it looked. I thought of all the outcomes and possibilities if this was breast cancer, so a part of me was terrified before I even knew for sure. I felt really worried knowing what might be ahead for me. When it was confirmed as cancer, I was sad and scared and in

***I never thought this would happen to me, at 36 years old. I am a healthy, active person, and I don't have any family history of breast cancer.***



shock. I never thought this would happen to me, at 36 years old. I am a healthy, active person, and I don't have any family history of breast cancer.

The plan for me is to have five months of chemotherapy before surgery due to the MRI showing that the cancer cells were spreading outside of my two cm tumor and across my breast. I am having four cycles of the most aggressive chemo combination referred to as "AC" (Doxorubicin, Adriamycin, and Cyclophosphamide) also known as "Red Devil." Then I will have 12 cycles of paclitaxel another type of chemotherapy. After these 16 cycles, I will undergo a double mastectomy with reconstruction. This surgery will happen within six weeks of me completing my chemo.

At the time of this surgery, after they remove both breasts, I will have tissue expanders placed. Depending on my final pathology report, if there are still cancer cells showing, I will need to have radiation therapy; I am hoping that the chemo is killing all the cells and I will not need the radiation. After surgery, I will go for weekly follow-up appointments where my tissue expanders will be slowly filled with saline to re-stretch my skin. About three months after that, I will have the second part of the reconstructive surgery where the tissue expanders will be removed and replaced with implants (this will only happen if I do not need radiation).

Treatment has been challenging, physically and emotionally. Cancer impacts not only you, but your loved ones around you and your social circle. Its a lonely road no matter how much love and support you have, because you




*I feel like every day I have a new emotion that I am faced with. Emotionally, physically, and mentally, it's draining.*

are the one going through it, and no one can fully relate to how you feel every day. The physical side effects have been the hardest. Feeling so weak and run down and not being able to walk up a flight of stairs without losing my breath. I feel like I have been put into a 90-year-old body overnight. Losing my hair and feeling like I don't recognize myself in the mirror most days has been hard to deal with psychologically.

I am trying my best to stay positive, to tell myself it isn't forever, and this is just a moment in time that I have to face, but it's hard to keep a positive mindset when you feel awful most days.

I feel like every day I have a new emotion that I am faced with. Emotionally, physically, and mentally, it's draining. I am in survival mode and trying to just get through the days rather than live them. This entire journey has been long and painful and trying at times, but it has put a lot of things into perspective for me. I don't worry about the small things as much, and I sure have an appreciation for the good days and the special moments that most people take for granted.

My family has supported me from the beginning. I told them I wanted to be open and share my story to bring awareness and I have felt so supported from them and my community, but I still see how hard it is for the people around me. I feel



like all I do is think about cancer and talk about cancer, and there isn't a day that goes by now where cancer isn't mentioned. The impact has affected everyone surrounding me and I don't think our lives will ever go back to the way they were.

My advice would be to take it one day at a time. Feel the feelings when you are sad; let yourself cry and don't hold in your emotions. Ask for help from your friends and family. This is a scary road and you do not have to do it alone. I have found there are many women who are struggling and even finding someone who's going through the same thing to talk to can help so much. Something that surprised me was how a lot of women are not comfortable sharing their diagnosis and are almost ashamed of talking about it. I have had many women reach out to me thanking me for being so open about my story, which has helped them feel better about sharing their own.

I would encourage all ages of women to start making it a regular routine to do self exams and to stay on track with their regular check ups. Stay strong: you are not alone. As hard as it is on the difficult days, try to remember everyone is behind you rooting for you. You will get through this and will come out so much stronger.





# Fertility & Pregnancy

## ***Fertility***

Certain breast cancer treatments can affect your fertility, so if you want to become pregnant after treatment, ask your doctor for a referral to a fertility specialist before you start cancer treatment.

Hormonal therapies, for example, cause your periods to stop and prevent your ovaries from producing eggs. Your fertility may return after the end of hormonal treatment, but some women may have difficulty conceiving.

Type of chemotherapy, dose and stage of your cancer can impact your ability to conceive. Your age may also affect your fertility. Women under 30 may have a better chance of their periods returning after treatment and therefore, may have a better chance of conceiving. Women over 40 have a higher chance of going into menopause after treatment.



To help protect a women's eggs during chemotherapy, researchers are looking at using drugs called gonadotropin-releasing hormone analogs (GnRHa). These suppress the ovaries from releasing eggs.

Targeted therapies may affect fertility, but because they are relatively new, little research has been done on them.

Radiation treatment to your breast has no effect on fertility.

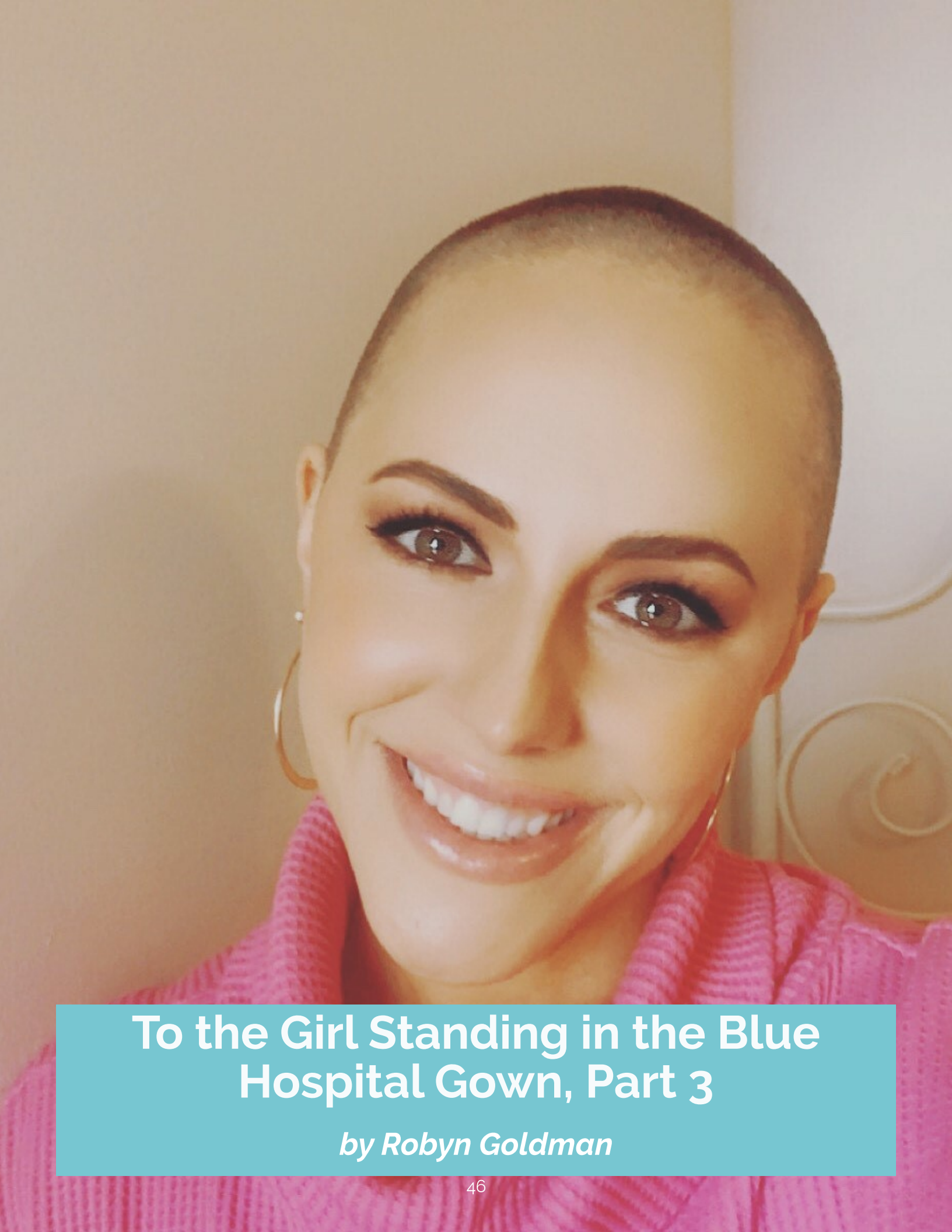
If are looking to become pregnant after your treatment, having a discussion with your health care team early on is recommended.

**Fertile Future** has more information and resources about fertility preservation options as well as funding options to help support these treatments.

## ***Pregnancy***

Breast cancer has never been known to spread to an unborn child. If you discover you have breast cancer while you are pregnant, you may be able to receive some treatments without harming the fetus. Your doctor will be able to inform you about what treatments are safe and appropriate for your type of breast cancer.

Both pregnancy and breast cancer provoke a wide range of emotions for which you deserve support. Talk about your feelings with friends and family, your medical team, or a counsellor, and ask those around you for practical support.



# To the Girl Standing in the Blue Hospital Gown, Part 3

*by Robyn Goldman*

### **Day 93: January 21, 2022**

Alex of Glow Up Wigs helped me with a wig and gave me some extra sparkle. I am overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude.

Through my tears you saw my hurt, but you managed to capture my beauty and energy. Alex, you are incredible at what you do.

When I look in the mirror now, my smile is bigger. Cancer cannot take that from me. I continue to love and accept every version of myself, and you have given me confidence when I needed it the most.

I have my golden crown.

### **Day 104: February 1, 2022**

Holy crap... I have cancer?

It doesn't seem real sometimes,





and I am still in shock. Like how? Why? In my head I scroll through these questions the same way I scroll for hours on social media. I know I'll never get the answer I am looking for and even if I do, will it make a difference?

This journey has been nothing short of a challenge for me. I'm halfway done, and I have another four rounds to go - this time with Taxol. While I celebrate a milestone of completing four rounds of the dreaded Red Devil, the happiness is very quickly replaced by the uncertainty of what's to come.

Working on my mental health has been the hardest part of this whole thing. There are (many) times the highs are weighed down by the lows. The loneliness I feel is harder than the treatment. If I'm not careful, the fear and uncertainty will take over.

This is trauma. This isn't a choice I made, I couldn't have avoided this, but I'll be damned if I let this take over. There is still beauty, beauty I didn't see before but beauty that is so clear now.

### **Day 134: March 3, 2022**

Today is Triple Negative Breast Cancer (TNBC) Day.

134 days ago, I was diagnosed with cancer.

134 days ago, I was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer.

134 days ago, my life changed.

134 days ago, I went down the google rabbit hole.

Google said the odds are against me. Google said that TNBC is one of the most aggressive types of breast cancer. Google said it's one of the harder cancers to treat. Google said that it's more likely to recur. What Google didn't tell me was that I am strong, brave, and fearless. Google didn't tell me that my family, friends, coworkers, and community will be there with me every step of the way. Google didn't tell me that I'll still be sexy and flirty! Google didn't tell me that I will continue to smile and laugh and that I will get through this. I am not a statistic, and those odds don't reflect who I am. I will celebrate every treatment, scan, and follow-up like it's a milestone. I will treat every day like it is a win. This week I have had bloodwork, an MRI, chemotherapy (for five and a half hours), a mammogram, and ultrasound, all to prepare me for my next milestone March 15 - my last chemo treatment.

### **Day 146: March 15, 2022**

I did it.

I rang the bell.

This isn't over yet; I still have surgery and radiation, but I am now 1/3 of the way done.

### **Day 172: April 10, 2022**

Science said I probably had cancer back in 2019. I didn't know. To be honest, if you would have told that girl that in a

***I am not a statistic, and those odds don't reflect who I am.***

few years she'll be diagnosed with cancer, she wouldn't have believed you either. It's been almost a month since my last round of chemotherapy. A month of riding this high. A month of celebrating that milestone. A month free from needles and appointments. A month of reflection. A month of worry and panic because you are in a state of limbo. A month of fear; has IT started to grow back since you aren't attacking it with lethal poison? A month of anticipating what is next and wondering if we have done enough. I am crashing from my high and draining the last bit of adrenaline left in my body, running on fumes. When I am still, I can feel the fear inside of me grow. Behind my smile, I am scared. Will this feeling ever actually go away? Or will I learn to just live with it the same way I will live with the scars it will leave on my body?

**Day 186: April 24, 2022**

Days since last chemotherapy: 40

Days since surgery: 10

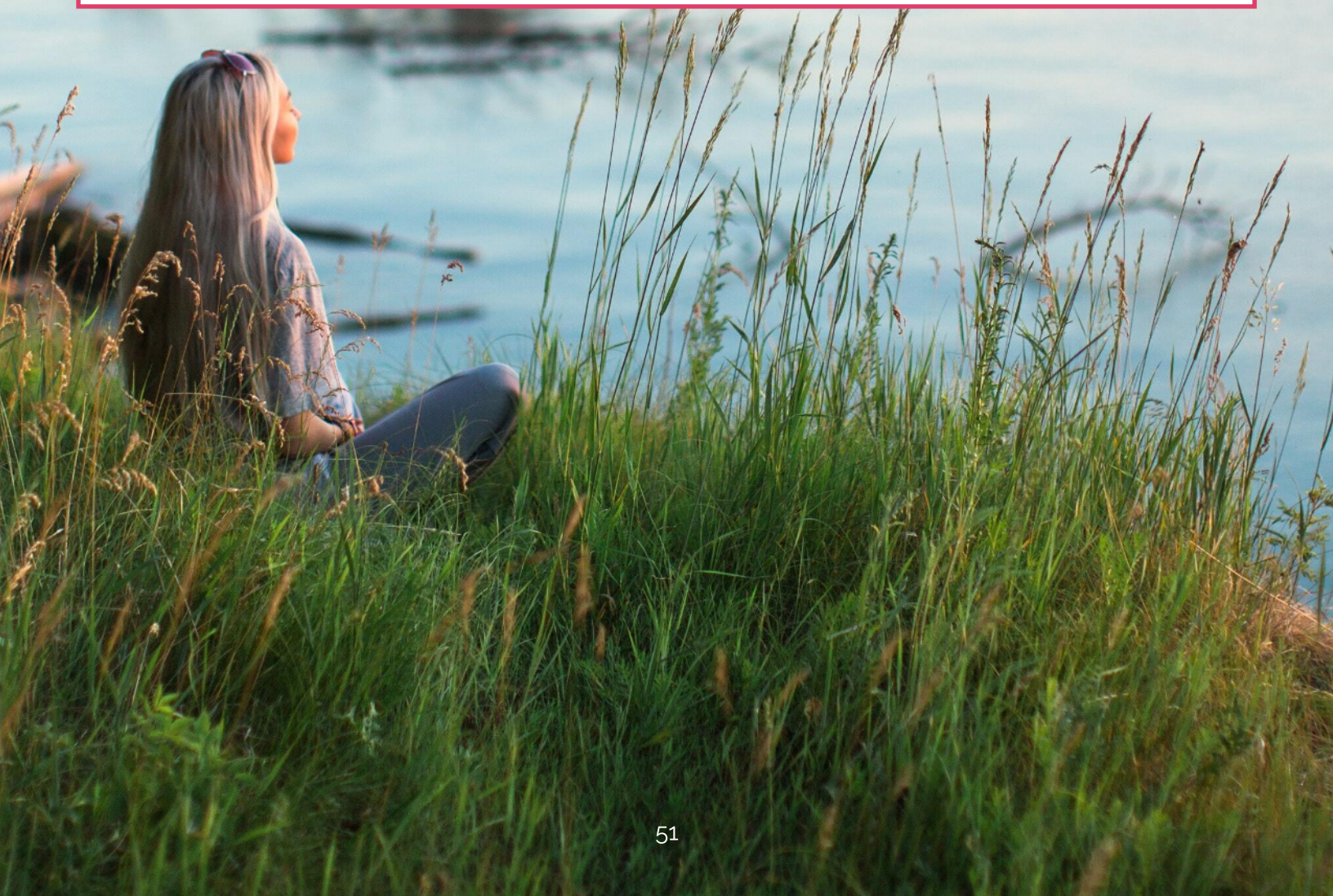
I've had cancer for over six months now. It's hard for me to wrap my head around how much time that is and what I've lost. How many of those days

*If you would  
have told  
that girl that  
in a few  
years she'll  
be  
diagnosed  
with cancer,  
she wouldn't  
have  
believed  
you.*




I've cried. How many days I've wished I didn't have cancer and asking myself why? How many hours I have prayed for this to be over and imagining what that will look like, wishing to be normal. Sure, my lips have spoken those words, and my eyes have cried many tears. My body hurts from the new scars that cover my breast and the pain has taken me to places I've never been. Yet, the time I have lost, I will be gifted in years. I keep reminding myself that my body is more than the canvas for my hurt; it is the home to my heart. So I am learning to soften the painful words that my lips sometimes speak and showering my eyes with the beauty that surrounds me.

If this is what my new normal looks like, then I'm okay with that.







Stories matter

***Our Voices*** is a place for breast cancer patients to share their experiences in their own words and to inspire others. The best stories focus on one specific aspect of the cancer journey. For example, you may want to talk about tips for dealing with cognitive difficulties that come from chemotherapy, or organizing a team of friends and family to support you during treatment. The choice of topics is yours and the length can be as short as one page.

Before you start writing, send a brief description of your story idea to us at [cbcn@cbcn.ca](mailto:cbcn@cbcn.ca), and we'll give you some more specific writing guidelines. Interested in sharing your story but don't know how to get started? Use our [submission template](#) and we'll put your story together for you.

The breast cancer community will look forward to reading your story!

## Order Our Resources

Finding reliable information on breast cancer can be overwhelming. We have produced various reports to help you understand your breast cancer diagnosis better. These resources are available online or in print.

[Order our resources today!](#)

## Subscribe to Our Newsletter

CBCN Connected is our monthly digital newsletter which gives updates on our activities, educational events, and resources. We also give updates on metastatic breast cancer with our mBC Connected newsletter.

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No one should face breast cancer alone. Donations from you help to provide patients with a supportive community that she/he can turn to for quality information, education and support.

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