

IN EVERY ISSUE

# Lost and Found

BY JODI LEAS

*From mastectomy to reconstruction and beyond.*

It rained the day of my mastectomy, a harsh downpour that fell from what appeared to be a huge dark hole spreading across the sky. I was glad the rain started early that morning because when I walked into the crowded hospital lobby, I was able to pretend the wet streaks rolling down my face were raindrops instead of tears.

I had cried only once before—in the surgeon’s office—a week before the operation when it all became too real. The surgeon talked in sentences but all I heard were nouns—breast cancer, mastectomy, cure. At age 41, I had accepted the fact that the complete removal of my left breast was medically necessary in order to save my life, but I couldn’t quite get over the fact that a part of me was going away for good.

As I lay on the hospital gurney waiting for the surgeon to arrive, I saw the years pass: a little girl in pigtails and jean shorts running topless in the backyard; a teenager in a bikini glistening with baby oil; a harried mother in a nursing bra waking for a 2 a.m. feeding; a woman with only one breast who wondered, what happened to my body?

When I awoke from the surgery several hours later, I received nothing but good news. The surgery was a success with no sign the cancer had spread. My health, after all, was what mattered most. Still, I felt ugly. The mastectomy site wore a 5-inch scar and was flat as a prom corsage pressed inside a yearbook. Every morning when I dressed I felt a part of me was missing, and I guess that’s because it was.

I tried to accept my new body. I told myself it didn’t matter, that the world was too obsessed with breasts. I just needed to be strong. But every time I looked in the mirror, I felt a sense of loss. I wanted to cry out when I spotted a woman in a strapless dress, the white crests of her bosom exposed. I wanted to cry out again when I received a Victoria’s Secret catalogue in the mail.

I needed to be able to wear my regular clothing again, so I bought a bra from a breast cancer catalogue with a pocket sewn in the side into which I could slip a breast form. I wore the bra until I spotted a tag on the back that read “Almost You.” I couldn’t imagine that for the rest of my life I was supposed to be almost myself. I flung the bra in the trash and ran upstairs to my bedroom. I unbuttoned my blouse and looked at my naked chest in the mirror. This isn’t almost me, I thought. This is me. That’s when I decided to fight back. I was going to have

reconstructive surgery.

When I woke from the TRAM flap surgery, the first thing I did was lift my hospital gown. I couldn't believe what I found. A beautiful breast, a breast so much like the other one I had to look twice to believe it was really there. For the first time since the breast cancer diagnosis, I felt like myself, a whole person, yet somehow even more.

In the weeks that followed, joy took hold of me. I left big tips for waitresses, bought expensive floral bouquets for friends, let my kids eat dessert before dinner. They didn't know what had happened to bring them this good fortune, but I did. The thing that struck me was this: If I could lose a breast and get it back, perhaps that can happen in other areas of my life as well. I truly believe what was once lost can be found. Whether it's the loss of a breast, a job, self-esteem or love, we can find it again. It may not come back exactly as it was, but we can reclaim it just the same.

In the strange, wonderful way that life works, I am stronger and wiser than I was before the rainy day of my mastectomy. It's one of life's miracles that when we lose any part of ourselves, a new joy is waiting to be found.

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