



Having Cancer and My Treatment

FELICITY

I FOUND THE LUMP IN MY BREAST WHEN I WAS 22... I didn't for a moment think that it could be Cancer. It was ignorant, but I had never heard of anyone my age having it. I had a check up with the Doctor, who told me to come back in a month if it hadn't changed. By that time it was larger and I was losing sleep with worry. They arranged a biopsy at the hospital, and I had to wait over Christmas to get my results. I found out on 3rd January 2003.

My initial reaction was one of shock, then devastation. I automatically started thinking of death – of losing my hair, and being sick all the time – all of the things which I had seen on television. Apart from my Grandmother, my Godmother and a friends' mother (none of whom lived near me) I had never known anyone with the disease, so I had no idea what to expect. The whole day was strange. My mum was with me and was naturally terrified. We had to tell my brother and my dad, and they came home. Strangest thing is for about two hours that evening I managed to forget about it. I watched a film with my brother, and felt normal. I was so tired from crying that I slept well that night and the next day I set about telling all of my friends. That was terrible. Most of them said 'you're joking' I knew that nothing was meant by it, but it was not the reaction I was hoping for! Others cried, which was worse, and some said 'Don't worry, they have really good treatments these days' That was the worst reaction. It was almost patronising. I knew that it was going to be hard, and didn't want anyone making out like it was going to be a walk in the park.

Anyway, the doctor told me that I would need an operation, and chemotherapy and possibly radiotherapy. They thought I would only need 4 or 5 chemo treatments. I had the operation after which they discovered I had Grade 3 cancer – the most aggressive kind. They then told me I would need 8 months of chemotherapy and a month of radiotherapy. Chemo frightened me the most. Maybe I was lucky, but I have to say it was not as bad as I thought it would be. I was sick after my first treatment which lasted about two hours, and felt very queasy for the few days afterwards, but then I felt fine.

My hair started to fall out two weeks after the first treatment, and within a few days it was all gone. I had already bought a wig, and whilst it wasn't perfect, it looked real, so I didn't feel too nervous about wearing it. I went back to work for two weeks out of the three before the next treatment and felt fine. Then the next treatment came and the next and the next. The sickness lessened. I was always sick on the first day, but ended up regaining my appetite on day two or day three.

My final four treatments were of a different kind. I was on a trial and received a drug used widely in North America to fight the disease. On this treatment I had no sickness, but I felt very very tired on the day. The drug also made me very susceptible to infections and I had to be very careful. I lost all my eyelashes and eyebrows on this drug also – I had managed to keep hold of them until then! I also had anaemia and had to delay treatments 3 times, as my blood count was so low. I did feel fine in myself though, and could see an end to it all.

Chemo did have an impact on my life. My friends were all going out every weekend, which of course I could not do. I went out about once or twice a month. I used to be very confident about my appearance, but that diminished too. Without my wig I looked a bit like an egg! I was used to having long blonde hair, which was a big part of my identity and all of a sudden I didn't have it. I also had no eyebrows or eyelashes. And the summer time was dreadful. It was a really hot summer and wearing a wig was torture. This upset me most in these months. I longed to take it off – it was itchy and sweaty, but I couldn't. I really didn't want anyone to know I had been ill – especially at work – so I just put up with it.

Chemo finished, Radiotherapy started and before I knew it, it was all over. I went on holiday to New York to celebrate. By that time my hair was about a millimetre long, and I LOVED it! I felt great and was overjoyed to have finished it all.

One of the things that struck me most about having cancer was the atmosphere in the Oncology Department. I can't say I looked forward to chemo, but I did look forward to seeing all of the familiar faces. We would talk about how we felt, how much longer we had before treatment was over, what we were going to do with our hair when it was growing back – it was a really friendly place to be. One of the women remains a really good friend – a Turkish girl who was the same age as me but I still see them all when I go for my check-ups, which is on a three monthly basis. The nurses were also amazing. I got to know them really well. They were really encouraging and affectionate – a lot of them felt like aunties by the end of it all!

I still worry about the disease, and the six months after treatment finished were the worst. I felt more frightened than when I was on the treatment. On the chemo you feel safe as you know the disease is being fought, but when it's all over the worry grows – will it come back? Will it be worse? I still have sleepless nights and I do find it difficult to talk about. I never push it to the back of my mind though as I still have to check my breasts regularly.

I think about it every day, but it does not run my life. I know I have been lucky, but it is not over yet. I have to wait three more years for the all clear. However, I have a great job, great friends and family (I don't think I could have coped with any of it without these people!) and I know I am a much stronger person as a result of it all.

