



MY CANCER DIARY:

*a year
of living*

DANGEROUSLY

When Vogue's Chloe Fox was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2016, she began chronicling her battle in a journal. Here, she reveals the ups and downs of that time

Portrait by Jonty Sale



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What do you do when you've just been diagnosed with cancer? When the dark, January rain is sleeting right into your soul and your unknowing children are at home, watching cartoons?

If you're me, you go to a bookshop. You walk in, clutching your husband's warm hand – as you have been, solidly, even in your sleep, for the past week of waiting for biopsy results – and you feel strangely at peace. After browsing for an hour in the comforting silence, I buy five books. *The Count of Monte Cristo* for me. I've never read it and I need something I can escape into. A book about trees for my husband, because outside is his safe place. And one each for the children. It just doesn't seem right to walk back into the house with only a potentially catastrophic secret to offer them.

A white room, strip lighting, a young consultant with a hot, red flush creeping up her neck from her chest. "You have an aggressive Grade 3 malignant ductal carcinoma in your left breast." They come at you, these words, like arrows. *Aggressive. Malignant. Cancer.* And you smile, almost. Because it's exactly like you'd always heard it would be. A sudden, yanking separation of self – a surreal, out-of-body experience that you are simultaneously watching and living.

You watch her mouth moving but you don't really hear what she's saying. More words come. *Surgery. Chemotherapy. Herceptin. Tamoxifen.* Words from news stories and fundraisers, marathons and pink ribbons and bras worn over T-shirts. Bald heads and girl power, and nothing that you ever, in a million years, envisaged as being part of your story.

On the outside, I'm nodding my head and asking endless practical questions – she must be rueing the day she had a journalist on the receiving end of a diagnosis – but on the inside, I'm screaming. I'm 39 years old! I have three children under 10! I have a book deadline, and a new house, and people coming for lunch tomorrow. What the hell is going on here?

My surgery – a lumpectomy to remove the two-centimetre tumour – is scheduled for February 10. My children's half term. And that's when the tears come. My children. My children.

Why can't she tell me that I'm not going to die? Why can't she take my hand, or reassure me, or do something human? As yet, she says, rash rising, they can't be sure what stage my cancer is at. It's only after the lumpectomy, when they will also perform a sentinel lymph node

biopsy, that they will know if the cancer has spread beyond the breast.

January 31

Today we told the children. Sat them down on the large window seat in our kitchen, built to fit us all, and told them that we had bad news and good news. I have sought advice from psychotherapist Julia Samuel – a friend of the family and founder patron and trustee of Child Bereavement UK – as to how best to proceed. Julia is wonderful and kind, but also immensely practical. The bad news? Mummy has cancer. The good news? That it has been found and the doctors know exactly how to treat it.

Julia, like everyone – myself most of all – is intrigued by the story of my self-detection. At 6am on the morning of January 6, I woke with a gasp from a nightmare so vivid and so shocking that I felt it to be real, in which I was dying of breast cancer. A dream. Thank god, just a dream.

Instinctively, I'd reached down. I had never checked my breasts. Wouldn't have known how. They are large, and have been the bane of my life since my friend Juliet had to help me on and off with my PE shirt when I was 11. Hard to dress, impossible to hide, and even more difficult to put to good use – 10 days after the birth of each and every one of my children they were engorged with mastitis – they felt, to me anyway, like they were always full of lumps and bumps. And yet this was different. This lump jutting into the palm of my hand was hard and intractable. Spiteful, somehow. And impossible to ignore.

I felt I was far too busy to go to the GP for what would inevitably turn out to be a cyst (my mother had them at my age), but something about my dream drove me on. Probably nothing to worry about, my GP reassured me as he booked me into the next available clinic at my local hospital, but best to be sure.

A word to the wise, before I go on. When you read a letter that says it is advisable to take someone with you to an appointment, take someone with you. Don't go, as I did, alone with only a pile of newspapers (full, in this case, of tributes to David Bowie) for company. Because if – just if – the abrupt feel of your breast turns into an ultrasound, which turns into a mammogram, which turns into a biopsy, which turns into radiographers not quite looking you in the eye and a kind nurse asking if you have someone with you, you won't feel quite so unutterably alone. "I'm afraid it's looking like your lump is of a slightly more sinister nature than I first thought," says a brusque >

consultant, pushing a box of tissues towards me – could it really be with irritation? – when I start to cry.

OK, right, I say to Julia. I will tell them I have cancer and then I will tell them I'm not going to die. You can't tell them that, says Julia. Because that is a promise that you might break.

"Are you going to die?" squeaks my seven-year-old daughter, while her 10-year-old brother hides his head in his hands and her three-year-old sister rushes off to get her doctor's bag. And all I can do is hold her tight and tell her that, of all the cancers I could have got, mine is the easiest to fix.

February 22

As I lie in bed, recuperating from my second surgery in as many weeks, the sleet hammers against my windows. It's not yet lunchtime, but the skies are completely dark. I watch, unmoving, as the leafless trees outside shake their branches in rage.

The surgery went as well as it could have done; the biopsy on my sentinel node showed one small spread, but not enough to cause undue concern. If the cancer was beginning to move, my finding it in time should mean that, with the right treatment, it will be stopped in its tracks.

Unfortunately, however, the post-operative tests on the tissue around the tumour showed evidence of pre-cancerous cells. And so, one week after my lumpectomy, I found myself back in hospital for a second surgery or "re-excision", as it's known in the trade. So now I am missing about half my left breast. It's not a pretty sight but that, at the moment, is the least of my worries. The hospital has just called and asked me to come in to discuss the results of my tissue analysis. This doesn't sound good.

February 24

A mastectomy, I am told, is looking like the safest option. My left breast is full of those pesky pre-cancerous cells. There will be no reconstruction at this stage; the safest course of action is to remove the dangerous breast, proceed with treatment, and reconstruct at a later date.

This isn't funny any more. I'm a strong person, I think. Physically and mentally, I can do this cancer thing. I can bounce back from operations, if I must. I can endure five months of chemotherapy, if I must. If I really, absolutely must, I can hold my head high without a single hair on it. But I'm really not sure I can do any of these things with only one boob. I know I don't love my breasts, but I'd rather have two of them, if you don't mind terribly. And no, a prosthetic shoved down my swimsuit isn't a good enough second-best.

March 18

For something that is saving your life, undergoing a course of chemotherapy bears a chilling resemblance to the image I have of being on death row. Two nurses administer my first dose; the first asking my name and date of birth, with another bearing witness as she injects two huge syringes of bright red liquid slowly into the vein nearest my heart.

It's been a long day. At 8am I was sedated and fitted with a portacath. An unsightly must for chemo patients, a portacath is a rubber disc with a soft plastic tube attached. It is inserted under the skin on your chest with the tube feeding directly into your aortic arch. This way, toxic drugs can be administered easily and effectively without damage to your skin, muscle or, ultimately, your exhausted veins. I feel some shame in admitting that, thanks to a family healthcare policy, all of this is taking place at the London Clinic in the height of luxury. However

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comforting it was to arrive at the hospital and be greeted with a copy of *The Times* and a porter to carry my bag, it certainly hurt my conscience.

When, in desperation, I had sought a second opinion from Joanna Franks, a wondrously upbeat young breast- and oncoplastic surgeon (who, incidentally, divides her time between the public and private sectors), she suggested an infinitely more palatable next step than an immediate mastectomy. With the worst of the cancer out, she said, she could see no reason why I shouldn't crack on with chemotherapy and have a simultaneous mastectomy/reconstruction at a later date.

For this first session, I have chosen to come alone. It is a huge thing, more than my shocked mind can comprehend, and I am walking as if through sleep. Since my diagnosis, I have found it much easier to be brave in a sympathy vacuum; underneath the forced jollity, the pain and fear on the faces of those I love makes mine much harder to bear. Makes it exist at all, in fact. Without love, I am brave. With it, I am terrified.

It's lucky, it turns out, that I am alone. In a desperate bid to keep my hair, I have

opted to wear a cold cap: a special, gel-filled helmet with a tight chinstrap – think Joan of Arc in the electric chair – that is kept at freezing temperatures and has to be worn for an hour and a half pre-treatment, two hours during, and half an hour afterwards. By reducing the amount of chemo drugs reaching the hair follicles, the cold cap can, in some cases, prevent hair loss. It can also, it turns out, prevent speaking, smiling or thinking straight. It is a claustrophobic, migraine-inducing misery.

With 15 sessions scheduled over five months, I think I know that this is a long shot, but I'm not quite ready for what seems, in a strange way, the most unbearable part of all of this: the prospect of looking in a mirror and seeing a haunted, hairless cancer victim staring back at me.

April 15

Today, my friend Julie – a local hairdresser with a heart of gold – came and shaved my head. Within days of my second dose of chemo last week, my hair had started to come out in my hand in great, unsightly chunks. So I decided to take back control.

To be honest, there is a sadistic part of me that quite relishes the idea of facing the deep. If I'm going to have this damn disease, I might as well really have it. As life experiences go, it is surely going to be up there with the most intense of them. In for a penny, and all that.

We sit in my bathroom, Julie and I, with my head turned away from the mirror. I play a little mental game where I pretend that I am an actress preparing for a film role. The end result is a little more Sigourney Weaver than the Natalie Portman I had hoped for, but it's so extraordinary, so unlike anything I have ever seen or done before, that it is almost quite thrilling.

Once the novelty has worn off and the reality of what is happening to me threatens to shake my resolve, we put on my wig. A synthetic number (a pop at £400 compared with the £2,000 that real-hair wigs cost), it really does look exactly like my own hair, perhaps even a little better. I'm sure it's going to be a lifesaver, albeit a scratchy one.

April 20

I have made a secret pact with myself not to let anyone, even myself, see me naked for the next few months. Before my nightly bath, I cover the mirror with a towel and lock the door. What they don't tell you – or what it certainly doesn't occur to you to think about – is that it's not just the hair on your head that goes. It goes everywhere, and I mean everywhere. Unfortunately, the lack of a

need for leg waxing cannot compensate for the fact that I look like a huge, scarred, bald baby. This, combined with the fact that my two big toenails have turned black and will soon fall off, makes me feel miserable and sexless. For better, for worse. I am astonished, daily, by my wonderful husband's unflinching love for me, but I'm terrified of how this is going to affect our marriage.

April 28

There's nothing like having your life threatened to make you feel alive. Time and time again, I am humbled by the wonder of the smallest things: the light on a leaf, the warmth of a bath, the smell of my sleeping children's hair. Although I don't feel I needed reminding how lucky I was, I have never loved my family – both the one I was born into, and the one I have built – more. The kindness of the people around me – from those I truly love to those I hardly know – pushes me forwards like a warm wind. Barely a day goes by without a letter or a parcel in the post. Boxes of books, cashmere dressing gowns, roses for the garden. Local friends have set up a food rota, delivering delicious meals to our doorstep, and yesterday a letter arrived from a relatively new acquaintance with a cheque inside – proceeds from her cookery book – which she wants me to put towards acupuncture sessions with a woman who, she believes, will truly help me through.

I am not always as gracious as I should be. Many a do-gooder from my village who arrives, unannounced, with yet another lemon drizzle cake gets quite short shrift. And woe betide the mother at the school gates who suggests I get in touch with her godmother's sister's niece's best friend who also had breast cancer and now climbs Mount Kilimanjaro at least once a year, if not twice.

May 24

Today I started a new 12-week course of a chemotherapy drug called Taxol (paclitaxel), which will be administered weekly. I also turned 40. The card and cake given to me by my lovely nurses, and the offer, from a dear friend, of a celebratory lunch in her garden at the weekend, did, I'm afraid, little to ease my self-pity. The only silver lining was that my brain was too blasted to even begin to have a mid-life crisis.

Naturally, it is shaping up to be a beautiful summer. While I am trapped under a hot wig and dark glasses, and medically required to stay out of the sun, everyone else will be having the time of their lives. As a warped birthday present to myself,

and in a desperate bid to save my sanity, I decide to delete the Instagram app from my phone. It feels surprisingly good.

June 11

Eleven weeks in, just over halfway through, and I am starting to lose myself. I feel like a ghost hovering on the edges of my own life. For my constantly aching head, anything other than an entirely silent state feels impossible to navigate: my own children's laughter is like nails down a blackboard, a well-meaning telephone call from a happy, healthy friend – “You're almost there, Chlo. I'm off to Ibiza...” – is enough to make me want to reach down the line and punch them.

But then anger, I'm slowly coming to realise, is an essential part of the process. As vital, if not more so, than love. Because anger is life force, and by god do you



Chloe Fox: there's a strange pressure that comes with being given a second chance

need deep reserves of that to get you through what feels like, at best, the worst hangover you've ever had and, at worst, a draining of your soul.

Yesterday, I felt truly frightened for the first time. Driving back home from my weekly acupuncture session (my friend was right. Along with a strict sugar-, dairy- and wheat-free diet and gallons of water a day, it is unquestionably saving my bacon), a sadness so deep and so dark descended over me, I could hardly breathe.

As a tractor crawled along in front of me, its wing mirrors winking happily in the midsummer sunshine, I contemplated overtaking. But it's a blind corner, I heard my subconscious say. You don't know what might be coming the other way. Who cares, said my toxic, blackened soul. Who cares?

Thank god for Decca Aitkenhead, a fellow journalist and breast-cancer patient, whose *Guardian* article had, while I was

out, been forwarded to me by a number of friends. “So we say that we... feel somehow unrecognisably unlike ourselves,” I read, while my children and their friends ran naked through a sprinkler in an alternate reality. “What we really mean... is that we feel dead without having actually died. It is a cruel irony that a drug designed to stop you dying makes you feel as if you have.”

June 24

Glastonbury weekend, and the news that Britain has voted to leave the European Union. Is it bad that I am finding some small comfort in the fact that the country's shock and misery feels as if it is mirroring my own?

July 1

This evening, I ended up in A&E. As my husband and I drove to London to go to a friend's book launch, I passed out in the passenger seat. Strapped upright by the seat belt, I had nowhere to fall. With the blood unable to get back up to my brain, I struggled to come round. Ambulances were called to a petrol station, and I was rushed in. In the panic I left my wig in the car. Nothing to worry about, doctors concluded after hours of tests. Just my battered immune system struggling to shake off a virus.

Shuffling around the hospital corridors in a gown, thin, pale, bald and browless, it strikes me that I have become the person I had most dreaded being. And yet, for all its horror, it feels rather liberating. In the eyes of strangers, as they look at me and smile, I realise that it's not fear or pity that I see. Only love.

August 10

As I look out of a taxi window at the warm summer streets, empty of commuters, I wish, not for the first time this year, that I had been paid an hourly rate for having cancer. Strangely, it's more like having a job than you might think: block out the diary, draw your eyebrows on, and just do it. Only don't expect to be paid.

It is my last dose of chemotherapy today and, for the pleasure, I have taken a sleeper train from a family holiday at my father's house in Cornwall to London. The main challenge this summer has been trying to keep the children busy and happy, while at the same time managing my own limitations. Without the structure and distraction of school, my illness – by now physically at its most obvious – seems amplified. I barely have the energy to build a sandcastle and yet, if I don't, these little people's hold on stability (and with it my own) seems to crumble.

My cancer, I have noticed, has made everyone around me, my children most of all, into amplified versions of > 222

themselves. My youngest, now four, is more my baby than ever; in my bed by night and on my knee by day. Her brother, the eldest, has taken being selfless and responsible to a worrying degree, covering me with a blanket whenever I fall asleep in the middle of the day. And their sister, always the most obviously emotional of the three, is openly struggling. Horrified by what's happening, she is angry, embarrassed and protective in equal measure. And yet now, just as they need me the most, I am barely there. Latterly, the relief I have felt heading for my weekly doses of chemo has confused and shamed me. What has happened to my life that being slowly poisoned is an easier option than being a mother to my children?

Today I am ending, as I began, alone. The chemo visits of friends and family – emotionally truthful catch-ups which have been the best of all silver linings – didn't feel appropriate today. I knew that I would cry the minute the intravenous drip machine bleeped its final bleep, and cry I surely do, tears of pain and relief that come from somewhere so deep inside me, they seem to belong to someone else.

There is something oddly life-affirming about getting to the end. So much of modern life is about cutting corners – watching the next episode of life's box set without ever having to wait – but there's no shortcut, no credit card for cancer. You have to face it, and endure it, and live every life-sucking moment of it, and there is a warped sense of achievement in that.

November 11

"Your pathological response has been complete. You are cancer free." As she stands to give me a congratulatory hug, my oncologist, Alison Jones, looks much happier than I feel. Perhaps I can put this down to the physical agony I'm in. Only four days ago, I was discharged from the hospital where I had spent a week in a high-dependency room, recovering from a 10-hour mastectomy and DIEP reconstruction, during which tissue from my stomach was removed and built into a new breast. *Free* is a strange word for what feels like the opposite. My spirit has never felt more shackled by the cancer than it does now. I feel exhausted, broken even, by the past 10 months. I have lost all my confidence, my sense of who I am.

Ironically, to the outside eye, I am becoming "me" again. My hair is growing back thick and fast. The light in my eyes – which are happily framed, once more, by lashes and brows – is returning. And yet, when I look in the mirror, I don't recognise the woman staring back at me. She seems older and infinitely sadder than she was. She loves and feels loved in a way that she never has before, and yet she sees loss and sadness around every corner. She no longer trusts the universe to behave as it should.

January 1, 2017

Last night we lit a bonfire in our garden and set fire to 2016: headscarves, steroid packets, doctors' letters. It felt good, and it felt right. Now all that remains is to rebuild a life that we didn't expect to be broken. Three out of five of us are in therapy. Sleep – that balm for the troubled mind – has been disrupted in every room in our house, night after interminable night. Nightmares, bed-wettings, sleepwalking, insomnia and, in my case, hormonal hot flushes. But somewhere on the edge of broken sleep, my life was saved by a dream. A dream so real that it actually became a reality. There's a strange pressure that comes with being given a second chance; a pressure to pick up, brush off, and live a life that shines much brighter than the life you lived before. Or perhaps the real challenge is to love the life you live, with a new cleavage to help you through? Because life. Life. My goodness, what a gift it is.

For now, for maybe forever, cancer will be a part of my life. But as I watch the sparks from the fire rise into the cold, starry sky above my home, I make a silent promise to myself, to never not be grateful again. ■