



'HAVING INCURABLE CANCER DOESN'T MEAN I WANT A BUCKET LIST'

When author **LAURA PRICE**, 40, was told her breast cancer had returned and spread, she decided to make the most of those everyday moments most of us take for granted



Waiting for the doctor in the hospital consulting room, I felt numb. I knew what was coming, yet a tiny part of me hoped I was mistaken. Then the oncologist walked in and said: "It's not good news," shattering every bit of hope I had left.

He explained the breast cancer I thought I'd been cured of 10 years earlier had been lurking in my body all along, and a potato-sized tumour had taken root in my sternum bone. I had stage four breast cancer - it was treatable but incurable.

I'd gone into the room alone to try to protect my partner Mark, and was dreading telling him - we'd only been together just over a year. After I came out, we sat on a bench and I broke the news.

Mark, 48, a marketing professional, was shocked - he hadn't allowed himself to think the worst. But within minutes, he put on a brave face, reassuring me that we could get through anything.

When given a life-limiting diagnosis, lots of people write a bucket list. But as I sobbed in Mark's arms, I didn't want a trip to the Seychelles or to go bungee jumping; I wanted to hold him and enjoy the simple pleasures many take for granted, like lying on the sofa



watching *Gogglebox* with a plateful of food and our cats, Cosme and Cleo, on our laps.

I was first diagnosed with breast cancer in June 2012, aged 29, after finding a lump in my left breast. Even though I'd had several misdiagnoses and it took four months to be diagnosed, I was lucky, as the cancer hadn't spread beyond my breast and was curable.

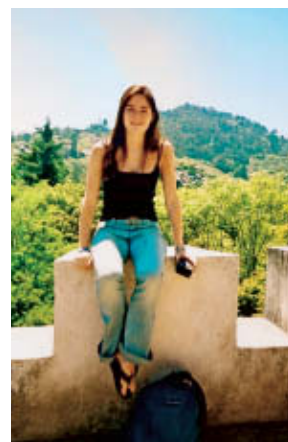
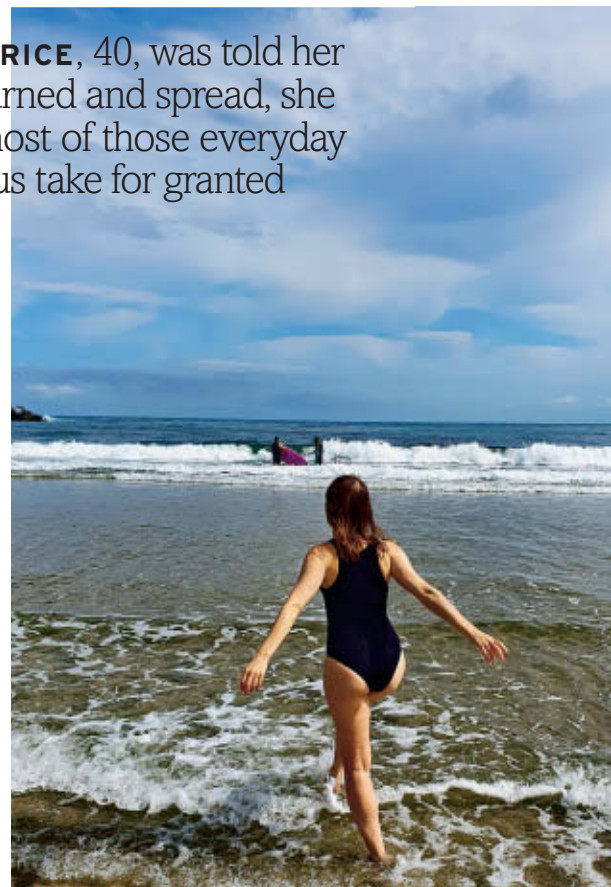
While my friends were getting married and having babies, I turned 30 with a bald head in the middle of surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. I'd always assumed I'd have kids, but I spent the next decade perimenopausal thanks to the treatment, and mostly single, slowly accepting that I'd probably never be a mother. It saddened me that cancer had taken away my choice.

I was given the all-clear and sent off to live my life in the aftermath of treatment, which included fatigue and hot flushes, not to mention the effects on my mental health. Alongside tablets to suppress my oestrogen, I had annual MRI scans, and with every year that passed, I hoped I was done with cancer for good.

I spent the next 10 years living life to the full. In 2013, I quit my job at Facebook in Dublin and moved to London to study for a master's degree in magazine journalism, something I'd always wanted to do. Afterwards, I found a job writing about restaurants and spent the next few years travelling the world, hot-air-ballooning in Australia, trekking in Brazil and visiting vineyards in Mexico. Every June 22, the anniversary of my diagnosis, I did something that made me feel alive, whether a jog alongside the Hudson River in New York, or a skin-tingling swim in the Thames.

I also got involved with the breast cancer education charity CoppaFeel!, meeting women affected by the disease. Every

Clockwise from top left: with fiancé Mark; during treatment last July; Laura was first diagnosed at 29; travelling the world as a journalist in her 30s; Mark proposed while celebrating Laura's 40th in Portugal



time one of them sadly died, it was a harsh reminder that my illness could return some day and I needed to live my dreams now. In 2019, I left my fast-paced food writing job to go freelance and finish the novel I'd been working on for years.

Then, in May 2021, I met Mark on a dating app. At 38, I'd pretty much come to terms with not having kids, so when I saw that Mark had three beautiful daughters, now aged 18, 15 and 10, I was relieved I couldn't disappoint him by not being able to give him children. We fell in love and in December that year I moved into his home with my two cats. With my debut novel about to be published, I felt like my life was coming together. It was almost a decade since my diagnosis and I felt more confident each day that I was cancer-free forever.

But in October 2021, I started to suffer from pain in my chest. Concerned, I went to the hospital for tests. But while they repeatedly did ultrasounds on my breasts, they never scanned my bones. After months of badgering, in June 2022, I finally had a PET-CT scan. By then, the pain had worsened to the point where it was excruciating to sneeze or even to hug Mark. A week later, in early July, I was told the news that would forever play in my head - my cancer had returned.

I was put on drugs that would shut down my ovaries to stop me producing the oestrogen that feeds my cancer, and if the drugs shrunk the tumour, I could have surgery to remove it entirely. But as the cancer was now in my bloodstream, any treatment would only keep it away for a period of time before it would return.

I was devastated. It felt so cruel that I'd been single for so long, and now that I'd found my person, I was given what felt like a death sentence. But after everything had sunk in a bit more, I began to feel fortunate I'd had 10 years, and I chose to focus on the positives in my life.

A few weeks after my diagnosis last summer, Mark and I flew to Portugal to celebrate my 40th birthday. He proposed to me on the beach in Porto, and my heart burst with joy but tinged with the gut-wrenching sadness that we might not get to grow old together. I held him tight, vowing to focus on the little things that bring me joy, like time spent with my three nieces, making up silly dance moves with Mark's youngest daughter, and those moments when he makes me laugh so hard it hurts.

Now, eight months since my diagnosis, I've responded so well to the drugs that in January I was able to have my entire sternum bone removed and replaced with surgical cement. There's a long recovery ahead, but my doctors are confident the operation will increase the chance of the cancer not coming back there. While the nature of stage four cancer means it will return eventually, I'm hopeful I have many happy years ahead.

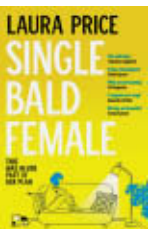
Mark and I are getting married this summer, in a small ceremony with just our close family. I couldn't care less about the big white wedding, as long as we can go to Brazil for our honeymoon and eat grilled cheese on sticks on the beach.

People spend their lives chasing trends - the hottest new restaurant, cool street art for the 'Gram and selfies with celebs. But the things that matter are right here in front of us: sofa snuggles, walks in the park, the soothing purr of a cat.

On New Year's Eve, Mark and I had a perfect day, with breakfast at one of my favourite restaurants, wandering around Soho, seeing a film and finishing with dinner at that same restaurant. It's those fun, spontaneous days I want to experience again and again.

However much life I have left, I'm determined to appreciate the simple things and spend time with the people I love - to me, that's far more important than ticking things off a bucket list. **F**

● *Single Bald Female* by Laura Price (£8.99, Pan Macmillan) is out now.



Photography: Krishanthi Purnanajah