



Surviving and thriving – Laura Price has had a whirlwind journey since finding a lump in her breast in 2012; above, with partner Mark and, right, with her new book. Main picture by Krishanthi Puwanarajah

Ireland saved my life – I’ll always be grateful

There’s something about cancer that makes you brave, says **Laura Price** – and her new novel tells how a ‘single bald female’ got her mojo back again

I’ve often said that if I hadn’t moved to Dublin in 2012, I might not be here today. That may sound dramatic, but it’s true that Ireland saved my life – in more ways than one.

I was 29 when I found the lump in my breast. Though I grew up in the very unexotic climes of Huddersfield in West Yorkshire, I developed a passion for languages at school and went to Brazil to teach English as soon as I turned 18.

In the years that followed, I studied Spanish and Portuguese at university in London and moved back to Brazil soon after I graduated, landing a job as a financial journalist in São Paulo.

By the end of my twenties, I was writing about oil and gas while living in a beautiful flat in Buenos Aires, Argentina – though I was preparing to move to Ireland to start a new job and move in with my Irish then-boyfriend.

I was on a surfing holiday in the north-east of Brazil when I stumbled upon the lump, while absentmindedly running a hand over my boob.

As soon as I got back to Buenos Aires, I Googled the Spanish word for ‘lump’ and tried to make sense of the medical system. On February 14, I lay under the strip lights, watching a grey-haired male Argentine doctor poke and prod at my breast in search of the lump – no romantic St Valentine’s Day for me.

After an ultrasound and mammogram, he sat with a smile on his face as he told me it was a non-cancerous fibroadenoma, common for women my age, and it should go away by itself within a few months. Or at least, he was 99pc sure that was it.

Little did we know, I was in the 1pc.

A month or so later, I had moved to Dublin and was adapting to the shock of swapping the glorious Argentine summertime for cold, sideways rain before starting a new job at Facebook, where I was to help lead one of the Latin America teams.

Though painless, the lump in my breast was still there, and my mum and then-boyfriend were badgering me to get it checked. Begrudgingly, I paid the €60 it cost to see a

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GP. She looked at my scans from Argentina and agreed it was probably a fibroadenoma, but referred me to a specialist for a consultation.

Since it wasn’t considered urgent, I waited six weeks for a consultation, then a further four weeks for a second-round mammogram and ultrasound. It was then that they hurried me in for a core biopsy – a term I had never heard of, and naively had no idea was a test to confirm the presence of cancer.

Weak and shaky from the anaesthetic, I sipped sweet tea from a polystyrene cup as they told me they’d have the results within a week.

By this time, I’d had several experts tell me the lump in my breast was nothing to worry about, so I went about my business as blasé as ever.

On the Monday, I broke up with my boyfriend, having messed up the short-lived relationship. On the Wednesday, I ran an 8k race in the fastest time of my life. And on the Friday, I found myself in a tiny, windowless consultation room at St Vincent’s

Hospital, hearing those words: “It’s cancer.”

Four months had passed since I’d found the lump and there was every chance the cancer had spread, but by some miracle, we had found it just in time. Though my ex-boyfriend was kind and supportive, I knew few people in Ireland – so I moved back to Yorkshire to live with my parents while I had surgery and chemotherapy.

I am fairly sure if I hadn’t moved to Dublin, I wouldn’t have been diagnosed in time to be successfully treated, and I may not still be here today, celebrating 10 years cancer-free.

Ireland saved my life in other ways too. After chemo, I returned to my job in Dublin while having daily radiotherapy at St Vincent’s. I’d been single for eight months and was keen to start dating as I wanted to start a family someday. I was unable to freeze my eggs before chemo, due to the unknown effect stimulating oestrogen could have on my cancer, so I wanted to find a partner before it was too late.

But I didn’t know how I’d find a new relationship when I was bald as a baby, possibly infertile, and with a scar like a tiny shark bite on my breast.

There’s something about cancer that makes you brave, though. At 30 years old, I made an honest dating profile, using photos of my bald head and mentioning I might not be able to have children.

It was St Valentine’s Day 2013, a whole year after those initial tests, when I matched online with a new Irishman – a trainee doctor – who loved me back to life. Having dissected tumours in the lab, he had a much more realistic view of cancer than the average guy. He knew I wasn’t necessarily ‘cured’ just because I’d finished active treatment, and he understood when all I wanted to do was watch boxsets.

The doctor and I broke up after a year – but I’ll never forget his role in building

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me back up again. He made me feel like a woman, despite the state my body was in. He didn’t care that I had no hair and felt completely broken.

I left Ireland later that year, returning to London to take the Master’s degree in magazine journalism that I had always dreamed of.

I loved my job working as a financial journalist – but blogging about cancer during my treatment had given me a new appreciation for sharing more personal stories. In early 2016, I woke up with a powerful urge to write a book.

By this point, I was jaded from two years of ghosting, gaslighting, and bad Tinder dates, and was tempted to give up. But then I remembered the 30-year-old me, who had fearlessly listed herself on a dating site with no hair and somehow met a good, caring guy.

There was something empowering in that – the idea that our most vulnerable selves can sometimes be our best selves, and that beauty most definitely isn’t everything.

Inspired by that experience, I began writing my novel, *Single Bald Female*, about a woman named Jess who is smashing it at life until she breaks up with her boyfriend after a breast cancer diagnosis.

While writing the book, I entered the ‘Date with an Agent’ competition and returned to Ireland for the International Literature Festival Dublin, which gave me an extra push to keep writing. I had a full-time job writing about restaurants by this point, but spent my spare time creating a fictional cast of characters touched not only by cancer but by heartbreak in all its forms.

I learned about love, friendship, resilience and empowerment, and I built myself back up along the way.

I always had the idea that by the time

I published a book called *Single Bald Female*, I would no longer be single myself. It took 10 years of online dating and a global pandemic – but a year ago, at the end of lockdown, I met the love of my life, Mark.

After a decade of perimenopause due to my cancer treatment, I was worried about not being able to provide children to an eventual partner, but Mark already had the full package, with three wonderful daughters. At the end of 2021, I moved into his home, completing the blended family with my two cats and his dog.

Single Bald Female was published in April and it couldn’t be more poignant as I’m celebrating 10 years since my cancer diagnosis.

It’s a while since I’ve been back to Ireland, but I plan to take Mark as soon as I get the chance. I know that when I step out of the airport, I may experience some trauma from the difficult times I had there – but I’ll also feel my shoulders drop with relief, as I know that Dublin will feel like home.

I’ll always be grateful for the special role Ireland served in my life. I am grateful for the staff at St Vincent’s, who greeted me with a smile for every single one of my 33 daily radiotherapy appointments.

I am grateful to people at Facebook, who so generously supported me both emotionally and financially throughout my illness. I am grateful for the cosy flat in Ringsend where I cried myself to sleep when my treatment abruptly stopped and my real life supposedly began.

I am grateful for my first, tentative runs along the beach at Sandymount Strand, where I nursed myself back to life with the slap of icy wind and the fresh sea air in my face. Ireland saved my life, and I’ll forever be grateful.

‘Single Bald Female’ by Laura Price, published by Pan Macmillan, €14.99, is out now

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