

A story of friendship and breast cancer

ON THE CUSP OF HER 30S, WHILE HER TWO BEST FRIENDS WERE SETTLING DOWN, LAURA PRICE WAS HAVING BREAST CANCER TREATMENT. HERE, SHE EXPLAINS HOW THOSE FRIENDSHIPS WERE BUILT TO WEATHER THE STORMS

We pose for a photo, hair arranged into glossy buns, lips slicked with matching MAC Ruby Woo. Helen, my best friend since high school, wears a bridesmaid dress in the same bottle green as mine, while Michelle, our closest friend since sixth form, looks stunning in her floaty bridal gown. That afternoon, we will follow her down the aisle as she embarks on her next big chapter. I will slap a smile on my face, knowing that two days later I will cut off my long brown hair in preparation for chemotherapy, as my own life takes an entirely different direction.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in the summer of 2012, weeks before my 30th birthday. I'd been working as a financial journalist in Buenos Aires, and had found the lump a few months earlier while on holiday in Brazil. After several scans, the Argentinian doctor said the lump was probably hormonal and to come back if it didn't go away. Four months later, having moved to Dublin for a new job, I heard the words I dreaded: 'It's breast cancer.'

Telling my friends was the hardest thing. Michelle cried, which seemed fitting – as teenagers, we made ourselves feel better by ugly-crying in the mirror. This was a friend who'd seen every side of me – we'd bonded over our small boobs, and taught ourselves to snog on our own arms. Helen was calmer; we'd always taken it in turns to dole out sensible advice while the other sobbed hysterically. I'd been with her when she found out about her father's death as a teenager, and she'd picked me up after countless break-ups, gently reminding me: 'The man who is worth your tears won't make you cry.'

Most of the time, our relationship revolved around putting on accents, and repeating silly in-jokes. I thrived on making them laugh, so getting sick was not in the plan. As a cancer patient, you gradually get used to looking and feeling ill, but it's a shock for friends when they suddenly see you bald. I didn't want to be someone they pitied.

After my diagnosis, I moved back to my childhood home in Huddersfield while I had surgery and chemotherapy, my jet-set career and love life put on pause; my independence halted. To make matters worse, I learned that chemo could decimate my ovaries along with the tumour, meaning that motherhood might never be an option – and I couldn't freeze my eggs for fear the process could aggravate my cancer. I knew I wanted kids some day, so the loss felt huge.



Happy days: Laura with Michelle (above) and Helen (top right)



'WE RELEARNED THE INTRICACIES OF EACH OTHER'S LIVES'

I sympathised with the home-schooling juggle, while they understood my grief as real-life dating became illegal. I saw that, while I'd spent adulthood chasing far-flung adventures and career highs, they'd sometimes felt 'stuck' back at home. Like most women, we are all dealing with our own stuff, and even though our experiences differ, we can still find common ground and comfort each other through the hurdles.

As we emerged from lockdown, I met my now fiancé, Mark, and soon moved in with him and his three daughters, aged between nine and 17. It felt serendipitous that I now lived with children the same age as my friends' kids, and could talk knowingly about playdates and pesto pasta. Finally, I was part of their world. And then, earlier this year – exactly 10 years after my breast cancer diagnosis – I found out the cancer had spread to my bones. This time, I was told it was incurable. It was weeks before my 40th birthday, and felt like the worst kind of déjà vu. At the same time, I'd sort of been expecting it – once you've had breast cancer, the fear of it returning never goes away.



I've always believed that cancer can be harder for those it leaves behind. This time, when I told them the news, Michelle was the calm one, while a sleep-deprived Helen sobbed as I told her the drugs would shut down my ovaries, ending the option of biological motherhood for good. But when Mark proposed to me a month later, they were both overcome with joy. People with stage 4 breast cancer can survive for years and possibly decades, but I'm focusing on quality, not quantity. I have a lot more living to do.

Dealing with incurable breast cancer as I enter my 40s has set me apart from my friends for ever. It breaks my heart that we won't get to play bingo together in our retirement home, like we always said we would. But after everything we've been through in our 25-year friendship, I've learned that it's the hard times that make us stronger. Sure, our lives have taken different directions, and yes, my life will likely be shorter than theirs. But true friendships aren't built upon the differences. It's the shared experiences that ground us; from wild nights dancing on tables to drinking tea while examining our chin hairs. And as my cancer progresses, and our children and stepchildren grow, I trust that we'll always be those three girls with matching red lipstick, keeping each other afloat.

For a guide to how to check your breasts (and pecs), visit coppafeel.org

Finishing treatment wasn't the big relief I'd hoped it would be. Everyone expected me to be fine, but the emotional collateral damage was only just beginning. When Michelle's first son was born and Helen met her future husband, I was enrolling on Tinder for the first time as a single, bald (and potentially infertile) female. It's possible to feel sad for yourself and still be overjoyed for your friends, though this still feels taboo to admit. Although I reminded myself that marriage and kids were still a possibility for me, my friends' increasingly settled lives were constant reminders of what I felt cancer had taken from me.

While Michelle and Helen continued working as teachers, I threw myself into my career, travelling the world as a food journalist while writing my first novel. Our lives were taking different directions, and I felt guilty I wasn't around enough. I didn't babysit their children and I wasn't there when they silently went through postnatal depression or spent long nights in A&E with their kids. I was too busy juggling my job alongside hot flushes and fatigue following cancer treatment, trying to escape the trauma of it all. When I did see them, they were often too distracted looking after their kids to get into a proper conversation. I adored their children, but I missed the days when I had their undivided attention; when drunken nights could run into long mornings nursing hangovers under duvets.

When the pandemic hit, something shifted again. While lockdown initially emphasised our differences – that I couldn't hug a soul for months while Michelle spent precious time with her young family – it also gave us a better understanding of each other. Our WhatsApp messages went from occasional to hourly as we relearned the intricacies of each



Still friends after 25 years and 'keeping each other afloat,' says Laura



Single Bald Female (Pan Macmillan) by Laura Price is out now

