

I hope you enjoy my little book. Proceeds from the sales will go to ward 203 at Frenchay Hospital, and the Oncology unit at the BRI.

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank Mr Baker at Frenchay and Dr Whipp at the BRI for making it possible for me being here and able to put this book together. To all the nursing staff, my mum, Hazel, and all my family and friends, a big thank you. Most of all, to David for printing this book and helping me through this ordeal. The last words are for Keith and Jackie. It's the only time I'll have the last words over Keith. Thank you for being always there, and for the support you gave me. Keith, you said I had trouble with my bag. Don't worry, I've found the shoes to go with it.

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Everything was quiet as I walked down the garden path at 6.30am on Christmas Day 1993. The snow was still falling on the thin layer that was covering the ground. I was on my way to Southmead hospital where I work as a cleaner on the mental health ward. I was wearing my Santa hat, with its flashing lights, to try to put myself in the Christmas spirit.

Just three weeks ago, after much pressure from my boy friend David, I had been to see Mr Baker of Frenchay Hospital, as I thought I had piles. After he examined me he said there was a small growth in my bowel. He took a biopsy right then. I asked him if he thought it was cancerous, but he could not commit himself until the results came back from the lab. I told him I thought my grandmother had died of bowel cancer, but I was not really sure. He made an appointment for me to see him in ten days time.

When I left the hospital I was very upset, but David reassured me and said let's wait and see what the results would be before we started to panic. I needed to find out whether my Gran had died of cancer, but I did not want to ask my mum. She did not know I had been to the hospital as I didn't want to cause her any unnecessary worry.

When I got home, I telephoned my sister Hazel who lives in Shropshire. She said she would come down for the day when I had to go for the results, and give me the support that I needed, but she was convinced that there was nothing sinister lurking around. When I put the phone down I had to find some way of finding out about my Gran, so I telephoned Ann. She is a close friend of the family whom I thought would know the answer and would keep a confidence, and what a tower of strength she turned out to be in the months to follow. She knew my Gran had bowel cancer but was not sure if she had died of it, so now I had to just wait.

My very best friends Jackie and Keith Pillinger, who own and run the Paramedic ambulance service, Hazel, David and Ann were my lifelines. They all phoned me every day and I could phone them any time day or night for support. I spent a lot of time crying and talking with Jackie and Keith, but Keith is one of those people who can find a funny side to everything, and that was what I wanted now. I didn't want sympathy. He told me not to worry as I had always been a pain in the bum anyway.

When the day came for the results, I was fairly calm. Hazel came down as promised and with David we sat in the waiting room waiting our turn. One of the nurses working in Out-patients is Anita, who has been there for years. She is very friendly but above all she is a great comfort to have around, and I was glad when David and I entered the consulting room to see her there. I'm not sure how Mr Baker told me I had cancer, but Anita was there by my side holding my hand, and after that my feet hardly touched the ground. He said that I was to go over to X-ray and have a liver scan and then come back and see him. When I got outside, I told Hazel the bad news. I was not crying but very calm. She now needed me to comfort her as she was so very upset, as she had been convinced that it was nothing to worry about.

After I had my X-rays I took them back to Out-patients. Anita made us all a much needed cup of coffee then the three of us returned to see Mr Baker. There was some good news. No cancer was found in my liver. He telephoned a Dr Whipp at the BRI and explained the situation. It was agreed that I would see her and have radiotherapy to shrink the cancer prior to having it removed. I would have a colostomy, but it would be reversed after about two months.

When we left the hospital, David went home, and Hazel and I went to tell my mum. We were both surprised how well she took it. I said my farewells to Hazel, and she went back to open the pub that she runs. I went home in a daze. I was scared by then. My fears turned to anger. Why me? Hadn't I been through enough already?

At 28, childless and facing divorce, I had a hysterectomy. Then at 38, while taking lunch with a boyfriend, I suffered a brain haemorrhage. The road to recovery was long and hard. I had to learn to walk again, and adjust to being partly deaf and not having any short-term memory, but I came through it with a smile on my face. Now I was not going to let all that hard work go to waste through this pain in the bum. The next part, which I found rather hard, was telling everyone the bad news. With Hazel and David's support, which was another hurdle I was over. It's funny how different people react to bad news. Some were tearful while others felt it cruel and unfair, but all agreed on one thing, that I had the strength and determination to conquer it.

My first visit to the Oncology unit at the BRI was nothing like I expected it to be. When David and I went to Reception, we were greeted with warmth and smiles. We were surprised how happy everyone was, including all the patients. As I waited my turn, we were offered coffee (no charge) and I was treated like a person and not a number.

Dr Whipp, who was in charge of my case, soon put me at ease. She could tell I was tense and angry and she was very understanding. As I said earlier, I have a problem with my short term memory so I had written down all the questions and worries that I had, and by the time I left the hospital all my questions were answered and most of my worries were gone. By the time my treatment proper had started the following day I was making jokes out of having the big C.

I left work early on my first day of treatment and allowed myself enough time to try and find somewhere to park. When I arrived, I was surprised to see a car park attendant. He found me a parking space and explained that if I were to be having continuous treatments it would be cheaper to buy weekly parking tickets and just place them in my windscreen. That was another problem solved.

I gave my name to Reception and took my place in the waiting room. I picked up a book but did not have time to read it as they called me for treatment right away. I was introduced to all the nurses who would be carrying out the treatment. Then I was asked to lie on the treatment table with my clothes just pulled down. I had to shuffle around on the table to get in the right position. I was measured and calibrated using beams of light. They had to make sure that the radiation was accurately lined up on the cancer. Small tattoo marks were put on each thigh and on my tummy, then the table was raised so that the X-ray machine could pass under the table. The doctors and nurses explained their every move. They put the radio on and left the room to turn on the radiation. They returned a few seconds later and shuffled me around again and then left again. I lay there waiting for something to happen but nothing did. I felt no pain or discomfort. That was one treatment completed, nineteen more to go.

While having my treatments I continued working, and this helped a lot. I had a lot of support from all my work colleagues, and I tried to find a funny side to my problem. Tania said if I had much more radiotherapy I would glow in the dark, so she offered to hire my services as a standard lamp if we had any power cuts, but my boy friend David thought I would make a better table lamp as I am only 5 feet tall.

When I was half way through my treatments, I had to give up work. I had diarrhoea and sickness but the medication that the Oncology centre gave me was doing me good. I was still in a good frame of mind. I had a couple of outbursts but I didn't stay grumpy for long.

With seven more treatments to go, I was feeling rather sore on my bottom. My skin had started to blister and split. When I told them at the centre, a nurse decided to bathe the area in salt water and dab it with iodine. This would soon clear it up, if it was done twice a day. I needed scraping

off the ceiling the first time it was done, but it's funny how pain doesn't hurt so much after a while. They gave me some wonderful cream that was so soothing.

My radiotherapy treatments finished and I had a whole day to myself, then it was into hospital again. My case was packed with my new dressing gown and nighties that my aunt Ada and Ann bought me. It's worth being poorly sometimes, you get spoiled rotten. I have popped down to see Keith and Jackie who have promised to come in and see me in the following week.

The staff were really great. Annie and Jane were my named nurses and I felt really confident in their care. I was in a small room off the main ward on my own and I was content with that. After having blood and water tests there was nothing else to do, so I asked if I could go out for a couple of hours. They agreed, as long as I returned by 10pm, so at 5.30 my sister Hazel took me home with my mum and David. We went out to a pub for a meal and a good time was had by all. David got me back to the hospital by 9.30. I fell asleep quickly but I woke up at 3am. The heat from the plastic covering on the mattress was making my bottom sore. The night nurse was a real angel and bathed, iodined and creamed the offending areas, but sleep still didn't come for the rest of the night.

My first visitor on Saturday morning was the doctor wanting more blood. My second was the stoma care gentleman, with the emphasis on gentleman. He closed the door to my room and sat on the bed. He was at ease and that made me feel the same.

His name was Mr Helmore. He drew a picture of my bowel, explained the forthcoming operation and said I had an obstruction. I corrected him and said "No, I've got cancer". He smiled and said he did know and he was not sure how I would react to the C word. His explanations about what was going to happen to me, and what to expect when I woke up, were spoken in words that I could understand. A tube up my nose, a catheter in my bladder, and a drip in my arm all sounded rather alarming but all very normal. He left me a book to read and again this was very easy to understand. He explained that I would have a home visit so there were no real worries about trying to cope on my own. He is coming back on Monday so we can decide where to place the stoma.

I don't know whether it was boredom or hidden fear, but by 7pm I was really angry and tearful. Poor David, no matter what he did or said it was wrong, then I felt guilty taking my hurt out on him. He reassured me and by the time he left at nine my tears had stopped. I telephoned him later to apologise and David being David said not to worry, and he understood what I was going through.

I bought a Sunday paper, something I never normally buy, but I wanted to take my mind off the fact that for the next two days I would only be having fluids. Bowel prep they call it, torture would be more appropriate. I am allowed as much water as I like, and tea and coffee with food supplements (like milk shake). It wasn't so bad, then at 4pm I had to have a glass of laxative. It wasn't unpleasant to drink and not too harsh on the tummy and bowel. I spent all the afternoon playing cards with Hazel and my mum and we laughed all afternoon. My brother Gordon and his wife Mary came into see me. That was great and it made the day so much brighter having people popping in.

David came in at 7pm. Visiting hours are flexible and he stayed until 9pm. I didn't sleep too well and at 7am I was informed that all I could drink today were clear liquids, no milky tea. That was going to be hard. At 1pm, flowers arrived from my niece. They were beautiful and they really cheered me up. My mum and sister came at 1pm, and for a while we played cards.

Mr Helmore the stoma specialist came to mark my tummy and decide where the incision would be. He brought a bag to show me. Seeing the bag stuck to my tummy really upset me and I cried, but he was so kind and understanding. With cuddles from my mum and Hazel the tears stopped for a while, but when it was time for them to leave I felt down again.

Annie and Naomi, my two guardian angels, sat with me and said it was understandable to be upset. Annie checked with the Anaesthetist and they agreed I could have a cup of tea. That was sheer nectar, and I felt so much better by the time Keith and Jackie (my Paramedic friends) called in with flowers. They said they were going to the Cattleman's Steak House for dinner, but they did promise to take me for one when I was better. That would be something to look forward to, especially as Keith drives a Rolls-Royce.

The anaesthetist came to see me later in the evening and told me very clearly what I had to expect. She thought I would be going to the operating theatre about 1pm. She said they would be giving me an epidural injection while I was unconscious, so that when I woke up I would not be in any pain. She said I may get a bad headache.

Hazel and my mum came in the morning to keep me company until I went for my operation. They promised to be there when I woke up. I didn't know when I would be able to put pen to paper again but I hoped it wouldn't be too long, as I found writing down my thoughts really helped. It was time to go to bed now. It was my big day tomorrow, the first of February.

February 7th, Monday. This was the first time I felt up to doing anything. How long my concentration will last is anyone's guess.

As I have said before, my memory is not too hot, so I hope the following events are in the right order. I was a little muddled for seven days. I remember I awoke after my operation in the recovery room. The anaesthetist was by my side and it was very comforting to see a face I knew beside me. The epidural inserted in my back certainly worked. I felt really good when they brought me back to my ward.

Hazel and my mum were waiting for me on my return and both agreed that I looked well. I tried very hard to stay awake but I kept dropping off so they went home for a much needed rest while I slept. They had been at the hospital for 10 hours. David came in to see me but didn't stay long. No matter how hard I tried I could not stay awake. When I woke up at 7am, I had the most wonderful cup of tea. Unfortunately it didn't stay down long.

Annie gave me a wash and dressed me in my own clothes. I felt really good and the only discomfort I felt was the burning on my bottom. I had a really bad irritation that I was told was due to the epidural. Mr Baker called to see me and said he thought things had gone really well. Although I had great faith in him and his team I still felt apprehensive about whether he had got rid of all the cancer. I tried not to let it show to my family and friends, but I suppose it's only natural to be concerned, scared, worried, whatever you want to call it.

Mr Helmore was my next visitor. He was pleased how the operation went, but explained that the stoma had to be put on the right-hand side, not the left as planned, because the shunt that I have inserted in my head runs down the left side of my tummy. I don't like the word stoma, so I am calling it Bertie from now on. Until I was stronger, Mr Helmore would be doing everything that Bertie needed. I couldn't bring myself to look at it yet.

Jim from work came in to see me, bringing a bottle of champagne. While he was there, Lynn and Pam my two bosses called with flowers; it was great to see them all. My employers were

very understanding over the months of my treatment, never complaining about my having time off every day for radiotherapy. I was reassured that my job would be safe; that was one fewer thing to fret over. They had not been gone long before Bob and Jackie, also from work, came in with the most beautiful bowl of hyacinths; they smelt great. All these flowers really brighten me up, and I feel better. Just knowing that people care and take the trouble to visit you really does help a lot.

People kept coming into my room to take blood specimens and give injections to help stop my continuous sickness. The itching was getting worse and so were the headaches. The doctor adjusted the epidural but I felt really poorly. While they were disconnecting my catheter, they decided it would be best to remove the epidural. That was a bit uncomfortable, but I can't say it hurt. So now, with only a drip in my arm, I was able, with the aid of a nurse, to go to the toilet pulling the drip stand behind me.

I left my side ward and joined five other ladies. It was nice to have someone else to talk to, and it's funny how you always feel better when you see others worse off than yourself. Hazel returned home and my mum came in every day.

My dear friends Keith and Lisa came in, and with David they put me in a wheelchair and took me for a spin in the grounds of the hospital. They were really good to me. When I had my brain haemorrhage they were at the hospital nearly every day. With friends like them and Jackie I am really lucky.

Well the catheter went next, and all that was left was me and Bertie. I waited for Mr Helmore to show me how to change "the bag". I hoped I could manage it and not show myself up.

Mr Helmore took me up to the bathroom. It was up to me now. I had seen him do it so easily, but now it was my turn I felt like a mother changing her first nappy. Task completed, and with a pat on the back from Mr Helmore I returned to lie on my bed. I felt very tearful.

Naomi walked past my bed and noticed I was looking glum. She pulled the curtains around my bed and asked what was troubling me. I said I felt strange doing something for myself that for years was just a normal body function. I didn't think I was going to be able to cope with it, yet on the other hand I felt guilty, guilty because I was one of the lucky ones. I had caught my cancer early and there was a good chance it would not return. There were people like Sue who I work with who was watching her beloved father slowly passing away. There was not a thing she or anyone else could do about it, except give him lots of love and medication. Naomi said I was being too hard on myself and it was only natural to have these feelings. She brought me a cup of tea and I soon perked up with the help of the other patients. It's funny how people in close proximity, no matter how shy they are, soon form a very close relationship when in hospital.

Ten days after my operation, and I was fit enough to go home with confirmation from my surgeon that my reversal will be at the end of April. David was very helpful, doing jobs that I would normally do. I still had a lot of discomfort from the radiotherapy burns and found it uncomfortable sitting down for too long.

About eight days after being home I started having a lot of pain in my tummy and bottom. My GP gave me pethidine and returned the next day to tell me she had phoned the hospital and arranged for me to see the doctor in Out-patients. They asked me stay in hospital for a couple of days for tests. I wasn't too worried as all the staff are so friendly and helpful. I didn't have anything to worry about and I didn't have anything but confidence in all the people involved in my recovery.

The first thing they did was to put me on morphine. This was followed by X-rays and scans over the next five days. The findings showed a small blood clot which although painful should disperse on its own. Five days later it did just that so I was allowed to go home. I hoped that this would not delay the reversal operation or I would have to cancel my holidays.

I was very depressed when I got home and I had really bad mood swings. Again poor David took the brunt of it, and Jackie was on the phone twice a day listening to my anger and tears. I tried phoning a cancer help line but she just made me worse. All she kept saying was "well I had a colostomy 30 years ago just think yourself lucky yours is being reversed; mine wasn't". This was not what I wanted to hear. I wanted someone to understand the anger I was feeling, not be given a lecture. But with David's loving and caring ways I managed to pull myself together and stopped feeling sorry for myself.

I had to have a barium enema to see if everything has healed up before they could go ahead with the reversal. Again I had to go through the dreaded bowel prep. I don't know why I got in such a state about it. It was nothing to worry about. I think it was the thought of not being able to have a cup of tea. A week after the barium I saw my doctors at Out-patients. He confirmed that all was well and I should be having my operation after about two weeks.

Four days later, his secretary telephoned me at home to tell me a bed had been booked for Friday 20th April, and that I would be on the same ward as last time. This I was very pleased with. As I said before, all the staff are really wonderful. The one thing I have noticed about the health service is how much it has changed over the years. We all know that nurses are a special breed of people but doctors in my opinion always seemed aloof, but not any more. They were so friendly and had always got time to listen to any worries. They would explain everything I needed to know without talking in a language I couldn't understand.

The staff seemed pleased to see me back and all agreed that I looked well. The doctor came right away to explain everything with me and to get the consent form signed. I just had to wait now, so they said I could go back home until the next day as long as I didn't break my bowel prep. I didn't, but it was hard watching my mum and David sat eating roast lamb and all the trimmings followed by apple pie and cream. Never mind, I wanted to lose a few pounds before my holidays.

I expected to have my operation at 4pm so again my mum came up to keep me company until my big moment. We were now getting rather good at playing scrabble and cards. At 1pm I started to get twitchy so we went for a walk in the grounds. When I returned at 1.30 they were waiting for me as my operation had been brought forward. The next thing I remember was waking up with an oxygen mask on and David saying I was OK. The nurse removed the mask and made me comfortable. David stayed for a while, but I was drifting on and off to sleep.

The doctor came at 8am and confirmed all was now well. He said my bowel is a little smaller, but if this caused any problems it was possible that it could be stretched in about a year.

I was allowed 15cc of water an hour, which would be increased as time went on. I wasn't allowed any food until the doctors could hear bowel sounds. Missing hospital food was not a problem. Some people like it but I thought it was dreadful. It was always cold and I never realised there were so many ways to cook pasta: pasta with curry, pasta with mince, pasta with everything. I never wanted to see pasta ever again.

After a few days my bowel started working, then stopped again. I was rushed away for some X-

rays. By this time I felt rotten. The X-ray showed I was completely constipated, so I was given an oil enema to loosen the stools. To say it worked is an understatement. Without going through all the gory details, the nurse showered me and made me comfortable without too much embarrassment. After that, all went well and I was allowed home on the tenth day after my operation. Two weeks after that, I flew with David to Indianapolis for my convalescence, staying with Jeff and Robin who are friends of ours. We had the most wonderful time, going to the Indy 500 race and being thoroughly spoiled.

Two weeks after our return I went back to work full time. With only a few minor problems, all went well. There are still check-ups to undergo in a few months, towards the end of 1994.