

Write a detailed comment on Cancer

It may seem a little odd to have chosen Ruth Picardie's book, "Before I Say Goodbye", for holiday reading, and I have to admit I had to hide in the hand luggage before my husband saw me buying it at Stansted Airport. He doesn't like me reading about cancer, you see. And even I might have felt it a little voyeuristic had it not been for the fact that I, too, am a member of the Big C Club.

Ruth Picardie was a journalist who was diagnosed with breast cancer shortly after the birth of her adored twins, when she was in her early 30s. She chronicled her condition in a column in The Observer, and these pieces are reproduced in this book, as is her most intimate correspondence, mostly by email, with her friends.

As I could so easily have been fobbed off by my (woman) GP - "I'm 90% sure it's nothing. Come back in two weeks if it's still there." - it is impossible to read a story like Ruth's without it being too horribly close for comfort. I had breathed a premature sigh of relief, and said "Oh, good. What makes you say that?" "Well, a tumour would be hard and irregular." I went home. Felt pretty hard and irregular to me. So I, who am very nonchalant about my own health and actually had initially doubted whether I could feel anything at all, went back. And insisted.

The consultant hardly needed to do a biopsy - the second his fingertips made contact, he knew. So did I, from his face.

None of us knows how we'll react to those 4 (or is it 6?) little words, "I'm afraid it's malignant". I knew two sisters, both of whom had had breast cancer. The first, who I was at school with, died, like Ruth, within a year. Her sister, who was diagnosed 3 months later, was an inspiration to me. She bared her breast to show me her scar and talked about how it had changed her outlook on life for the better (shopping and holidays being the most effective of all therapies). There was no doubt in my mind which sister I was going to be like. Like Ruth, I was not able to face up to my own mortality. I even wrote to leading cancer expert, Prof. Karl Sikora, to say that perhaps the reported increase in cure rates for b.c. was due to heightened awareness of cases that would have cured spontaneously and

therefore not featured in earlier statistics. This from someone who didn't even take biology  
'o' level. Denial or what?

Initially, I felt an odd kind of euphoria, as though I had come face to face with the worst thing that could happen to me and, hey, here I was walking around Waitrose. Couldn't be that bad, then, could it? I didn't have a big "C" branded into my forehead. I just looked like everyone else. I could almost see the huge white hand of fate's lottery looming out the sky and pointing to the unsuspecting woman in front of me at the checkout, saying "It could be youhoo".

Once I got over this incredibly silly stage - it lasted about 24 hours - there were more serious questions to face up to. Most of all, would I, could I, tell my parents? My father had suffered two illnesses that I considered stress related - stroke and heart attack - in recent years, and I had been brought up in an atmosphere where the "C" word was never uttered. Instead, an endless stream of euphemisms were used. Auntie Debbie had "the worst", old Mr. Goldman was suffering from "the curse", other unfortunate acquaintances fell victim to "you know" or were simply "very, very ill". All these murmurings were whispered at something just above audible, and accompanied by eyes cast skyward and followed by a swift "p-p-p" (a Jewish way of warding off the evil eye).

I am not a very good liar, but am a bit better at half-truths. So I contrived a way to explain away my ten-day absence for surgery during the scorching summer of '95, and used to venture down to the hospital car park, with my chest drain hidden in my chicly (is that a word?) arranged Harvey Nicks carrier bag, so that I could honestly say I was ringing from my husband's car.

I like to think that my decision to spare them was purely an unselfish one, but, to tell the truth, I doubt if I could have put up with the burden of constantly assuring them that I really do feel OK.

For Ruth, for whom words - on paper or in cyberspace - were a natural form of expression, her writing must have been incredibly cathartic. This is my catharsis.

Ruth's book made me cry buckets, but, more surprisingly, it made me laugh, too.

