

## **After breast cancer, awash with life**

**The Star-Ledger (Newark, NJ) - Sunday, September 25, 2005**

*AMY ELLIS NUTT, STAR-LEDGER STAFF*

Tonight I will dream of water.

I will lie in bed, my eyes closed, waiting for sleep to wash away the last trace of the day. And then it will begin.

I will be swimming. Sometimes in the ocean, sometimes in a pool not unlike the one in Basking Ridge, at the home of my older sister, Eva, where I have spent many hours this summer.

It has been this way for months now, ever since I finished my last chemotherapy treatment on June 2. The water thing is a strange obsession for someone who rarely went near, much less in, a pool or the ocean for 20 years. And yet there it is. I think about the water all day long and feel its pull. And often, during this past summer, I yielded to the urge. Perhaps because I have not had the time, or the inclination, to ponder the way cancer has changed me, the water is a subtext, which I can no longer avoid - a physical as well as psychic bridge into my unconscious.

A year ago, I was bald, scarred, my left breast flattened from mastectomy and not yet halfway through the 16 months of treatment that began in March 2004. With Breast Cancer Awareness Month just a few days away, I am still trying to figure all of this out.

So much of my experience of cancer has been paradoxical.

A routine mammogram in June 2003 gave me the assurance that for at least another year I was safe from the disease that had killed my cousin at age 42. But four months later, while in the shower, I discovered a lump in my left breast. I was not too alarmed at first because I'd had cysts and benign tumors before. But by November the lump had grown and by December it had become painful. I went to my primary care physician, then to the radiologist, then back to my primary care physician, then to a breast specialist.

After a biopsy at Somerset Medical Center, my surgeon, Angela LanFranchi, called me with the news: I had a stage II tumor, invasive ductile carcinoma of an aggressive, fast-growing type of cancer known as Her-2. Three days later, on Friday the 13th, I underwent a mastectomy. It was a good thing I did. The cancer, which before the surgery had been located in two different places in the breast, was found to be in two

more.

To the astonishment of my doctors, I was node-negative. In other words, the cancer, as far as they could tell, had not metastasized. The paradox is that, if I hadn't had an aggressive cancer, where the tumor grew noticeably over a short period of time, I might have dragged my feet more after discovering the lump. I would not need radiation, but I would have to undergo chemotherapy.

The reality - and paradox - of cancer is that it is often the treatment, not the disease, that makes you most aware of your broken body. Anyone who has ever been through chemo knows that, even with today's medications to help with side effects, it is a brutal business: nausea, fatigue and mouth sores; toe nails peeling away, and, of course, the loss of all your hair.

Being bald, however, was a lot easier on the psyche than seeing clumps of my hair on the pillow each morning. My friend and colleague, Robin Gaby Fisher, accompanied me to a hair salon in Bridgewater to have what remained of my hair cut off. To our utter surprise, I had a beautifully-shaped head. Spending the summer under a wig did not last long, so between baseball caps and going au naturel , I often chose the latter. For fun, I asked a few of the more follically-challenged men in the newsroom if they'd pose for a photographic portrait, and I now have those pictures hanging in my apartment.

As someone who spent time in the groves of academe before becoming a journalist, I have always considered myself a fairly cerebral person. Being in a body was more nuisance than sustenance because the life of the mind was so much more interesting.

When you have cancer, acknowledging the physical fact of embodiment is, to put it mildly, unavoidable. You feel it all the time, and it is not pleasant.

But here was another conundrum. My acute awareness of my body made me rediscover something I thought was impossible to recover.

One early April morning, I awoke to the soft treble of rain against the bedroom window. For whatever reason, I got up, pulled on a light jacket and went out to the front porch. I stood there, not thinking of anything really, but smiling, blinking back rivers of rain as they polished my hairless head into a fine cool marble.

It was, to be sure, a moment of grace - the world both moving forward and yet suddenly still. Measureless. Reminding me of what it must have felt like to feel rain for the very first time. It's not that I have let such things go unnoticed over the years, but they FEEL different as you get older. Time lays down layers of insulation and, slowly, irrevocably, the world grows fainter, like looking through a clouded windshield. No matter how often you swipe away the mist with your sleeve, the windshield keeps clouding over. It is not only our eyes that lose focus over time, but the way our body feels the world. What was once sharp and novel and acute becomes dull and distant. Yet another lesson we learn from loss.

Cancer, for many, is a didactic disease, with two diametrically opposed lessons. One is that no matter your age, you are now officially old, treading lightly from here on out, on the cusp of death.

The other is that suddenly, melodramatically, life takes on a sunnier hue. It is a precious commodity, you now realize, which before cancer had gone unappreciated. Life, with its small pleasures as much as its grand gestures, can now no longer be ignored.

So it's natural that sometimes people ask if cancer has changed me. I have a hard time answering, other than the obvious, "Yeah, it means I list a little to the right now." But what I've come to understand is that the experience hasn't so much changed me, as unearthed something long buried: This clarity of sensation I'd thought I'd lost years ago.

I think this is why I am drawn to the water now. I think about it all the time. I even believe the water thinks about me, too. Misses me. When I am in the water, there are times when I want to open my mouth and swallow it all whole. The water allows me to feel my body again. However misshapen by age or disease, it is alive to the sensation of being alive.

There will always be loss, always borders toward which we all are moving, beyond which we all will pass.

But always, we return to life, to love, to everything.

Yesterday, I stopped at my sister's after work to take a swim. No one was home, except for my nephew Jordan, watching ESPN with his friend Mike. I said hello. They knew why I was there.

I swam, above the water and under, occasionally touching bottom with my feet and propelling myself upward. When I float on my back, I think about lying in the snow and I move my arms and legs to make angels in the water.

There may not be many more days for me to swim this year. The black-eyed Susans my sister planted between the pool and the patio are dried and withered, their petals long gone but their stalks still bending toward the sun. It is the habit of memory, I say to myself.

The sun-splashed water shimmers like liquid fireflies. It is alive, happy to have me. Floating, the only sound I can hear is my own breath. The clouds scuttle by.

I swear I feel the earth breathing back.