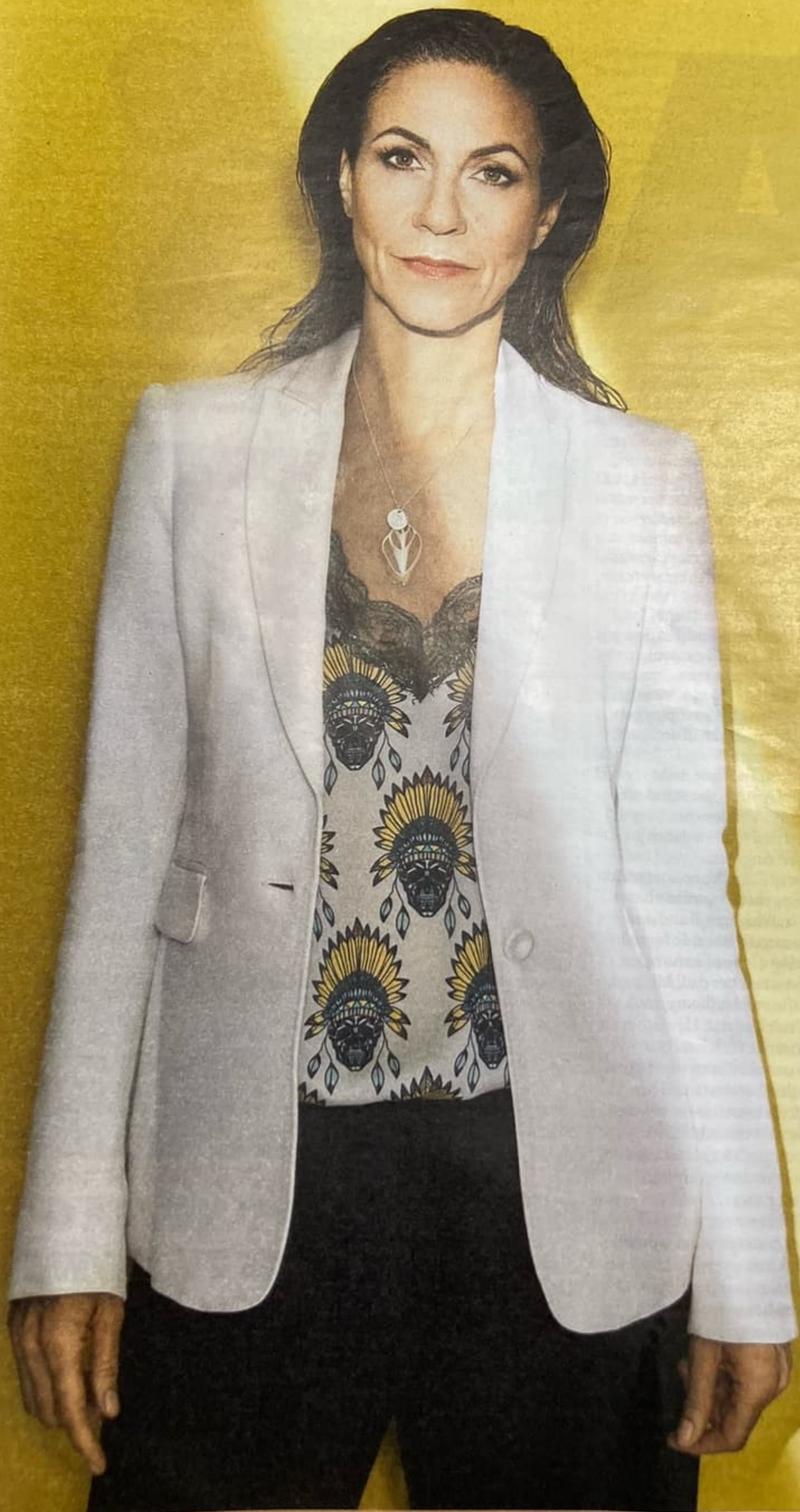


# I'M IN CHARGE, MY CANCER ISN'T

The former Countryfile presenter Julia Bradbury was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2021 and underwent a mastectomy. She tells *Caroline Scott* why she allowed cameras to follow her progress — and how she's fighting back

PORTRAIT BY DAN KENNEDY







# A

s the former *Countryfile* presenter who later criss-crossed Britain wearing sensible waterproofs and sturdy boots in a succession of walking-themed BBC series, Julia Bradbury, 51, is a byword for wholesome outdoorsy entertainment. Yet her professional life began in the scream, shouty world of a cable channel called LIVE TV in the 1990s. The sexism of the era was eye-popping. The weather was read by Norwegian girls in bikinis, the business news presenter stripped to her knickers as she read out share prices and there were topless darts matches.

"It was misogynistic beyond belief," Bradbury says. When she refused to do a programme called *The Sex Show* (which included couples being sent into a box to have sex in front of a live TV audience) a boss, she says, shouted, "We employ you, Bradders, you old horse. You will do whatever we tell you to do."

Bradbury, only 24 at the time, held her ground. Three days into the stand-off she was hired as GMTV's showbiz correspondent and fled to file celebrity interviews from Los Angeles.

It feels far, far away from the coastal walks and country rambles that have made her name. She's been walking uphill and down dale with a cameraman by her side for more than 15 years, sharing a love of nature that began in childhood when her dad, Michael, a sales director in the steel industry, took her hiking in the Peak District. Her father taught her to catch trout with her bare hands and to draw comfort from the natural world, something that has sustained her ever since, through endometriosis, which made conceiving her three children difficult, through bouts of sleeplessness and depression, and most recently through her diagnosis with breast cancer.

In September 2021 she went public with her illness to encourage other women to check their breasts and get tested.

And when, soon after, a production company approached her to make a film about her treatment, she agreed to let cameras follow her through the process. The result — which airs later this month — is an unflinching march through medical consultations and treatment, interwoven



Above: Julia Bradbury shared this photo from her hospital bed after her mastectomy last October. Below: a topless shot taken earlier before her "last walk in this body"



**"I SAID I'D NEVER GO  
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with intensely emotional scenes with her family. "I always said I'd never get my tits out on television," she says, referring back to her unhappy stint on *LIVE TV*. "And here I am 20 years later and the camera crew and sound man have all seen my boobs. Oh, the irony of it!" She laughs.

She had a mastectomy in October and there is no sign the disease has spread. But every cancer story is its own hellish narrative. Bradbury's involved a near miss: the tumour was in an awkward position at the back of her breast and was flat and long and invisible on a mammogram due to her dense, fibrous breast tissue. "I feel lucky it was found when it was," she says. "Because a year later, it could have been a different story."

A lump she discovered in 2020 turned out to be a cluster of benign microcysts. She had a clear mammogram and ultrasound in July last year and only kept the follow-up appointment in September because her sister, Gina, "insisted". The appointment was nearly over and Bradbury was getting ready to leave when "the consultant said, 'I'll just examine you quickly again.' As he passed the ultrasound over my breast he paused and said, 'I don't like the look of that. Can you see it?' And he pointed to a tiny speck on the screen that I could barely see."

The day her test results were due, she was supposed to be filming in a harness, 60ft above the ground in private woodland. She'd had the presence of mind to take time off so when the call came she was standing in her garden in west London, leaning against a wall, ready to write everything down. A biopsy and MRI showed a large ductal carcinoma with microinvasion — meaning it had started to spread from the ducts into the breast tissue. "I just remember the words: early breast cancer, substantial-sized tumour — 6cm — high grade. The word 'lumpectomy' was used and 'possible mastectomy'. I cried, because it was cancer and you automatically go to the worst place, don't you? Then I thought, my kids [Zeph, 10, and twins Zena and Xanthe, 7] are going to live through this too. What painful things will they witness and how was I going to protect them? The shock and sadness were immense and overwhelming."

She says making the documentary was a welcome distraction. "It was something for me to think about that wasn't about sadness," she says. "I do not want to live my life shit-scared that this cancer is going to come back because that's a horrible way to be. I have to be able to use my positive mindset."

The most difficult day was when the crew followed her into a nuclear scan — where a radioactive dye or tracer is injected into the body to check whether a cancer has spread. As her left breast was exposed, Gina, noticing Bradbury's body shaking, crawled



Left: Bradbury with fellow presenters Jono Coleman, Trish Adudu, Kirsty Young, Josie d'Arby, Jack Docherty and Gail McKenna for the launch of Channel 5 in 1997. Below left: outside the Cibi boutique in London run by her sister, Gina



under the table to avoid the camera and held her hand while tears plopped silently onto her pillow. Gina recalls Bradbury whispering, "Sis, we're going to do a f\*\*\*ing big mountain walk when this is over". I thought, trust me, this is the biggest mountain you're ever going to climb."

The scan showed her tumour hadn't spread into her lymph nodes and the next day Bradbury had her mastectomy. "I knew what was coming," she says, explaining her tears. "There was this exposed breast, which tomorrow would be gone. It was just so incredibly sad and brutal. I felt such overwhelming sorrow and bewilderment, not being able to control this at all. And knowing you're going to be disfigured, whatever your recovery."

She had a skin and nipple-saving mastectomy — her surgeon was confident he could take out the tumour with good margins and perform a reconstruction there and then. "Which I'm really grateful for now. But then I just didn't have a clue. I didn't understand [the full impact of] what having a breast amputated meant," she says. She woke up with a very inflamed, bandaged left side and a silicone implant, because she lacked enough body fat to pad out the reconstruction.

Her husband, Gerry, whom she rarely mentions "because he doesn't like to be spoken about", has been a rock. He is, she says, "a very emotional human being and has been incredibly understanding and just amazing at supporting me with the kids. He's a very involved hands-on daddy and he's made sure we navigate this the right way for the children."

Bradbury worked hard to have them. She had five rounds of IVF before conceiving

the twins and is a grateful older parent. "I've always adored everything parenthood has to offer," she says. "Even more now because there's that voice in my head: how much longer? How much longer?" She has always wandered around the house naked, so the children have seen her implant. "My little girl said, 'Mummy, I loved your soft boobies. It doesn't feel the same.' And I said, 'No, but I'm still here and that's what we want.'"

She announced her mastectomy last October on Twitter to show solidarity with the one in seven women who will develop breast cancer and the roughly 18,000 a year who will have a breast removed. This figure has risen by more than 50 per cent over the past 20 years — some are elective surgeries to prevent cancer returning.

Just before her surgery in October, she appeared at the Royal Television Society awards looking radiant in an off-the-shoulder silver jumpsuit. It was both an act of defiance and a farewell. "A goodbye to the body I've been living in all these years."

She already had experience of cancer in her family. Her mother, 84, has survived bowel cancer and her father, 81, has overcome prostate cancer.

Bradbury grew up in Rutland and went to school in Sheffield. Gina, older by ten years, — they have different fathers — is also her manager. They are exceptionally close. Their "very loving, very caring" Greek mum, Chrissi, ran a business selling couture, "the only shop in the north of England where you could sit on a chaise longue and sip champagne". Gina brought the concept to London, opening another shop in Beauchamp Place, Knightsbridge.

When Bradbury got the gig at GMTV filing celebrity interviews Gina went to LA with her, trying to keep her chin off the ground as she watched her spirited little sister with her wild, uncombed curly hair interview Hollywood greats.

Bradbury now says she regrets being "too loud, too brash" in her early career, though she was also hard-working and tenacious. When Channel 5 launched in 1997 she was one of its first presenters. In 2009 she found a natural home on BBC's *Countryfile*, which she presented for five years.

A health and outdoors nut — she's the president of the Camping and Caravanning Club — she's also known in the industry for having hollow legs. "I'd be the one sitting at the bar with you at 4am still ►



packing it away. Though I've drunk much less since I had the kids."

Tall — she's 5ft 9in — and naturally whip-thin and fit, Bradbury thought of herself before all this as not just healthy but incredibly resilient. "It's such a cliché but I took my amazing body for granted for so long because it powered through so much," she says. "Now I realise just how hard it is to be healthy." Uncontrollable factors such as her height, gender and age — 80 per cent of breast cancers occur in women over 50 — all put her at increased risk.

Some scientific studies have also indicated a link between IVF and breast cancer, while others have found none.

Now Bradbury is on a mission to tackle the things she feels she can control. "Everyday life showers us with toxins," she says. "You have to be incredibly disciplined and quite regimented about health in order to really be a healthy person." She is following a strict organic plant-based diet, avoiding GM, sugar and additives.

For years she relied on adrenaline to get her through early starts and long days, ratcheting up her energy by eating bucketloads of refined sugar: "Doughnuts, chocolate, biscuits dunked in tea, cake, children's sweets — those awful coloured ones — every day, no problem. And pudding too, because I could. I've got a massive appetite and a really sweet tooth and I never put on weight. Between breaks in filming I'd have chocolate bars and brownies and, 'Ooh, that looks nice — give me one of those...' I'd eat anything going. The crew used to wonder where I put it all."

There is, though, no evidence that eating too much sugar gives you cancer or that



With her sister, Gina, in 2016. It was thanks to her insisting that Bradbury attend a follow-up consultation that the breast cancer was spotted relatively early

reducing sugar intake prevents recurrence. "No, but what you will find is that sugar messes with your hormone pathways, it messes with your metabolism and it messes with your brain," she says. "So when you're piling in refined sugars, emulsifiers, unnatural colourings and preservatives, those things end up in your gut, in your microbiome, which delivers messages to the whole body through neurons, messing up the way that it works."

There is growing evidence that the microbiome — the trillions of micro-organisms that inhabit the gut — affects everything from metabolism to mood to the immune system. Which is why, in a kind of belt and braces approach to her cancer, Bradbury has not only completely overhauled her diet, she has thrown away "cupboards and cupboards full of stuff" at home, replacing laundry

detergent, dishwasher tablets, cleaning fluids and more with "clean products" mostly bought from online suppliers. "I thought most of my products were green but I've realised how much 'greenwashing' there is. When I started to read the ingredients on the labels and researched them, I realised that they contained so much bad stuff. I haven't been able to clear out everything yet because it's very time-consuming. There is so much homework to do."

She's keen to talk about a test called the SNP polygenic risk score, which assesses cancer risk based on genetic variations (SNP, single nucleotide polymorphisms) in DNA. It may, combined with mammograms and risk-assessment questionnaires, provide a more accurate risk analysis for some cancers and particularly breast cancer. "My polygenic score puts me in the top 5 or 6 per cent of the population [for breast cancer]," she says. "If I'd had a SNPS test when I was 40, I would have been instantly flagged as at least moderate risk and eligible for mammography screening from the age of 40." The NHS doesn't usually provide regular mammography screening until women are 50.

About 70 per cent of breast cancers are oestrogen-receptor positive (ER positive) like Bradbury's, which means the cancer grows in the presence of oestrogen. Now she has to make a decision about whether to start hormone therapy drugs such as Tamoxifen or aromatase inhibitors, which stop the body producing oestrogen, or take another route: "To manage my hormones, decrease my stress levels and use diet and lifestyle to control my risk."

## How to lower your risk of developing cancer

**Professor Robert Thomas is a consultant oncologist at Bedford and Addenbrooke's hospitals, specialising in the treatment of breast, bowel and prostate cancer.**

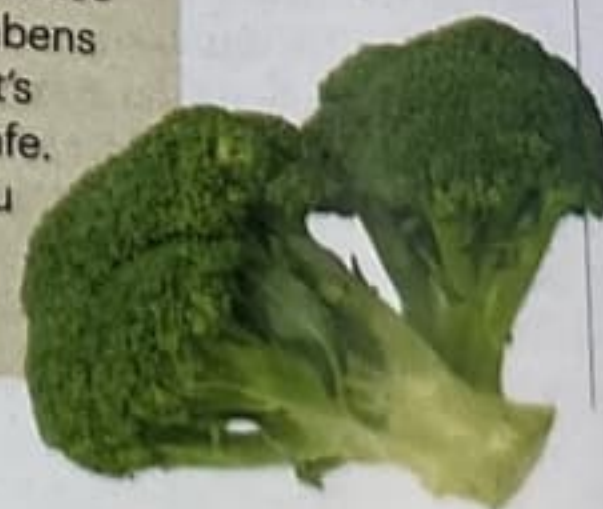
"A combination of genes, lifestyle and environmental factors affects our risk of developing cancer. About one in three of the most common cancers could be prevented by eating a healthy diet, keeping weight down and exercising more. After cancer, a healthy lifestyle can help treatments work better, reduce side effects and improve the chance of a cure."

We know sugar is linked to diabetes and weight gain but also to poor gut health. It reduces the quality of the important microbiome and increases inflammation in the body, so cutting back will help you cope better with cancer treatment, give you more energy, put you in a better mood, reduce fatigue and help prevent many chronic diseases linked to chronic inflammation including further cancers, arthritis, osteoporosis and even dementia.

Our research at Bedford Hospital, looking at the eating habits of 155,000 people over 12 years, showed a clear link between eating cruciferous vegetables and a lower risk of cancer. We have also shown that boosting the diet with healthy plant chemicals called polyphenols, found in fruit, vegetables, herbs and spices, can help slow cancer progression, and exercise during radiotherapy can reduce side effects. Though we don't want people to watch everything they eat to the point where it causes feelings of guilt and ramps up stress levels.

I try to limit my exposure to chemicals in things such as food additives and environmental pollution. Go for a jog in the park, not the high street, use deodorants sparingly and, if I were a woman, I'd use cosmetics and skincare products without parabens and aluminium. If you have a breast cancer that's oestrogen dependent, all this is sensible and safe. There is no robust evidence but sometimes you have to resort to common sense."

For more information, visit [cancernet.co.uk](http://cancernet.co.uk)





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**“THE TREES ARE GREENER,  
SMELLS ARE SWEETER,  
THE SKIES ARE MORE  
BLUE. EVERYTHING IS  
MAGNIFIED”**



Top: with her children, Zeph, 10, and twins Zena and Xanthe, 7.  
Above: atop Helvellyn in the Lake District for the 2018 programme  
Britain's Favourite Walks: Top 100

She has also set a lot of store by the Dutch test, which stands for “dried urine test for comprehensive hormones” and is marketed as a complete profile of sex and stress hormones. Bradbury’s test was performed in America but it is widely available in the UK through nutritionists and natural health clinics, costing about £400. Bradbury says it showed her cortisol

levels were through the roof. “My doctor in the US used the words, ‘You are running on fumes and burnout.’”

She says, “I am resilient, I know I am. Now I have to learn how to be Zen and calm. There are a whole range of supplements I’m going to start taking, including B12 and folates, which help you detoxify and help your pathways start

operating in a more effective manner. Basically, I’m out of balance.”

I couldn’t find a single UK endocrinologist who would endorse the Dutch test. But I do understand Bradbury’s instinct to research everything furiously. She comes with a file of handwritten notes, test results, annotated studies and lists of books she’s reading on food, diet and metabolism. All the information she brings — some feels like woo-woo, some at the forefront of scientific research — is incredibly important to her and she needs to be in charge.

“This is all very new and still very raw,” she says carefully. “I’m still pulling it all together, collating all the facts, working it all out.”

There’s a long pause. “There’s an element of sadness coming through now,” she continues. “I can’t change the way I’ve lived my life, but if I’d known all this information about detoxification and how your body processes all the shit stuff, I’d have been a lot more careful.”

Wonder if Bradbury’s family are worried about the pressure she’s putting herself under. She says her dad is concerned about all the tests. “He’s asked gently, ‘Is all this really helping you?’ But they are helping me decide what I need to do from here on in,” Bradbury insists.

Friends have been incredibly supportive, “sending round trays of organic food so we wouldn’t have to think about it, and soft front-opening hoodies”. She’s cut back on work and is now focusing on getting herself well. This involves more sleep — “I’ve always been a night bird” — meditation, breathwork and diligent daily exercise. She does weights and walks through Holland Park and down the Regent’s Canal because exercise reduces the risk of recurrence.

“I’m trying to garner as much information as possible to empower myself, knowing that further down the line I’ll share it,” she says. The documentary is a start; at some stage she’ll write a book. She hopes it may save a stranger’s life, but the fact-finding has also provided a mental diversion from “all the horror and sadness that goes with a breast cancer diagnosis”.

All her life she’s found comfort and stillness and calm in the outdoors, but now “the trees are greener, the smells are sweeter, the skies are more blue. Everything is magnified.” But sticking to a tough exclusion diet and driving down stress levels is a hefty responsibility if you believe your life depends on it. “It is and sometimes it feels a bit overwhelming; but I have to learn to live with this risk now without it consuming me. It’s a project and I’ll find a way to make it work.” ■

**Julia Bradbury: Breast Cancer and Me**  
airs on Tuesday, April 26 at 9pm on ITV