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'The moment I knew I'd never be the same'

As surgeons drew
these marks on
her breasts,

**JULIA
BRADBURY**

finally had
to face the
frightening
realities
of cancer





'Before my op I felt like a piece of meat on a block,' says Julia. For our shoot, she wanted our make-up artist to reconstruct the felt tip marks the surgeon made on her chest

'I THINK ABOUT LIFE IN A DIFFERENT WAY NOW'

Diagnosed with breast cancer last year, JULIA BRADBURY has had to endure months of gruelling treatment (including a mastectomy then reconstruction). Opening up for the first time, she shares her story – and hopes for the future – with Sarah Oliver

PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID VENNI

It was two months before Julia Bradbury could bring herself to look at the site of her mastectomy. The last time she'd seen her left breast it had been prepared for surgery with dots and dashes of black felt tip marking the lines where it would be cut away. 'They were like something you see in the butchers,' she says. 'I felt like a piece of meat on a block.'

'At that point – and I think this is a moment that every woman who has had a mastectomy will share – I had never felt so lost, so out of control and so deeply sad. The shape of me, as I knew it when I looked in the mirror, was never going to be the same again.'

The TV presenter, 51, best known for her

ITV walking shows and fronting BBC One's *Countryfile*, was diagnosed with a 5cm tumour in her left breast last July. She underwent a mastectomy and had two lymph glands removed in October.

Six months later she is now having to come to terms with the knowledge that she does not yet have the 'all clear'. Julia has 'micro-invasions' – tiny fragments of cancerous cells which have leached out of her milk duct and into her breast tissue. Furthermore, genetic testing has shown that she has a higher than average risk of her cancer coming back.

'I'm in the top five or six per cent of women in the country in terms of the likelihood of recurrence. That puts me in the "moderate risk" category – higher than the average woman – but, look, it's about percentages

and perspectives. The doctors have not found a huge spread of an aggressive cancer. I have lost my breast but been able to have an implant and keep my own nipple. I feel lucky and grateful every single day, and I have to learn to live with this risk, to accept the fragility of life, without it consuming me.'

Julia is acutely aware that other women have to have double mastectomies and rounds of chemotherapy. She considers herself very lucky, yet her life has still been upended by the disease.

Ultra-fit before surgery, she found herself barely able to move after it. And from being a hands-on mum to Zeph, ten, and twins Zena and Xanthe, seven (she has been married to her husband Gerrard for 20 years), she wouldn't video-call them from her hospital bed in the brutal aftermath of →



Shirt and trousers, Serena Bute London. Earrings and ring, Tilly Sveaas

surgery, never mind agree to a visit. 'It would have done me good to see their little faces but it wouldn't have done them any good at all... You're still a mum, still protecting them no matter what.'

It was the summer of 2020 when Julia found a lump in her breast. A mammogram appeared to show a collection of harmless micro-cysts. A year later, in July 2021, a second mammogram concluded the same but, because the lump was increasingly tender, she was sent for an ultrasound scan. 'I was chatting to the consultant – we were talking about summer holidays – and suddenly he paused and exhaled, and in that second I knew. It was this tiny, dark pinprick on the screen, that's all. But it was enough. Your world just falls away.'

She had a biopsy which confirmed what the ultrasound had shown. The telephone call from her consultant was devastating. 'They said it was a high grade, sizeable

tumour that could be trouble to treat. And the reality is, when you hear the words "you've got cancer" you think you are going to die.' It swiftly became clear that to save her life, Julia would have to lose her breast.

Asked to describe how she felt when she was told she would have to have a mastectomy, she says: 'I can't. It's all so unreal, you have to remind yourself that the doctors are talking about you.'

Faced with no alternative, she decided that physically she would take control; upping her arm strength, building her pectoral muscles and increasing the mobility of her shoulders to create a bulwark against the coming trauma. But it was harder to prepare herself emotionally because 'you just don't know what awaits you on the other side of cancer surgery. There is no certainty about what it is, how far it has spread or what it is going to do to you. You are in the dark and that makes you vulnerable. I had a

lot of questions. "What it is like to have a breast amputated? How is reconstruction going to feel? Could I have done anything ten years ago to have reduced my risk of this happening?"'

In search of answers she did something drastic: she picked up her phone to chronicle what was happening to her and went public on social media to build awareness of breast cancer. After a chat with a friend who is an award-winning TV executive, the idea of making a documentary about her journey from diagnosis through surgery to recovery came slowly into focus.

Those initial video diaries and the subsequent filming by an all-female crew charted Julia's medical appointments and her dive into the pioneering research which could soon identify every woman's individual risk of breast cancer. They also show her tearful duvet days and her mother Chrissi

'I HAVE TO ACCEPT THE FRAGILITY OF LIFE WITHOUT IT CONSUMING ME'

making consoling soup in the kitchen of her daughter's London home.

The day before her surgery, Julia took the advice of a friend, a doctor, who'd had a double mastectomy. 'She told me to say a formal farewell to my breast. I thanked it for all its years of service, the breast feeding, the bikinis, the jiggling about when you're running for a ball... and I'm glad I did. Today, I am thanking the new one. I have built it into my daily meditation, welcoming it into my body. Silicone implants can be rejected – I want mine to know it's welcome!'

She's sounding cheerful and resolute but the truth about her surgery is that she spent almost twice as long in hospital as she had expected, unable to get up without the help of her devoted big sister Gina. Her recovery began with shrugs of her shoulders and a shuffle to the loo.

For a woman who hikes up hills for a living as well as for pleasure, these tiny challenges might have felt frustrating. 'From shoulder shrugs I graduated to shoulder rolls then spider-crawling my hand up the wall over my head. Those little physical victories, I loved them. One involved lying on my back, putting my hands together in prayer then touching the floor behind me. I thought I'd never be able to do that. It took me four weeks of trying. Succeeding was bliss because that was the moment when I knew that, yes, I could get back to the fitness I had before.'

Despite this optimism, Julia could still not look at her new breast. 'I didn't want to →

Blazer and trousers,
Studio Amelia, from rites.co

PICTURE DIRECTOR: ESTER MALLOT, STYLING: ANNA WAZ, HAIR AND MAKE-UP: ALICE THEOBALD AT ARLINGTONARTISTS USING DIOR CAPTURE
TOTALÉ SUPER POTENT SERUM AND FOREVER FOUNDATION, MORGAN'S POMADE HAIRCARE AND MAVALA NAIL, DAVID VENNIUCHILLI MEDIA



see myself so horribly damaged, bruised and battered.' It took till nearly Christmas and her mother's reassurance on the appearance before Julia could be coaxed into examining herself. Bravely, she agreed to do it – on film. 'It was always a career no, getting my breasts out on television, but here I go,' she says.

'I looked at it in the bedroom in my wardrobe mirror and – I don't want to upset my surgeon, because he has done a brilliant job – it looked like a Plasticine boob. That was eight weeks post-mastectomy. Several weeks later, my mum looked again and said "Jules, it is beautiful," and I realised how far I had come.'

Her physical ambition is to be able to hold a handstand by the end of this year. As it is, her chest is still so tender that she sleeps with a heart-shaped pillow between her arm and her body. It was made by one of the thousands of volunteers who craft breast-cancer aides such as cushions, drain dollies (the bags mastectomy patients need to carry their chest drains around) and even 'knitted knockers' – knitted and crocheted prosthetics used by women whose type of cancer has ruled out reconstruction. They're a gift from woman to woman.

Julia has been humbled by the scale and generosity of the breast cancer community. 'There are so many women in it,' she says. 'Far too many.'

Advances in recent years mean that

76 per cent of those women are now alive a decade after diagnosis. But for some the risk of recurrence is greater. This is something we see Julia explore in the documentary as she reels off the list of tests she put herself through post surgery. She knows it's not what every woman with breast cancer would want to do but, for her, knowing is less terrifying than not knowing.

Julia underwent SNPs testing (pronounced snips, it stands for single nucleotide polymorphisms, meaning a variation in a genetic sequence that affects only one of the basic DNA building blocks). It can give those with an elevated risk of some diseases, such as Julia, an early warning by identifying

genetic anomalies that raise the chance of breast cancer over a woman's lifetime. They differ from the inherited better-known gene mutations BRCA1 and BRCA2 which cause breast cancer in families and led actress Angelina Jolie to have an elective double mastectomy.

SNPs testing has been pioneered by Gareth Evans, professor of medical genetics and cancer epidemiology at the University of Manchester. His work showed Julia's risk of getting cancer again was more than 15 per cent, higher than the national average. 'If I'd had SNPs testing when I was 40, I may not have needed a mastectomy,' she reveals. 'I would have been on a watch



list, been more vigilant myself, started screening earlier and perhaps made some lifestyle changes a decade ago.' Although Julia was always mindful about what she ate and drank, she has now gone teetotal and stripped sugar from her diet.

SNPs testing is not yet available on the NHS but leading cancer charities hope that within the next five years it could be. It would mean instead of having a mammogram every three years, women would be divided into high-, medium- and low-risk groups then be treated accordingly. A SNPs test would cost the NHS around £50. The current average cost of treating breast cancer is £20,000 per woman, Julia says: 'My

Dress, Victoria Beckham.
Bracelet, Completedworks



Julia with her children, twins Zena and Xanthe, seven, and son Zeph, ten, and with her sister Gina



'I TOLD MY DAUGHTERS: "MY BOOB IS DIFFERENT, BUT IT'S HERE. AND SO AM I"'

documentary is about my experience, but I have also tried to shine a light on the possibility of women having a targeted, personalised approach to breast cancer which would see many more cases being picked up early. That would save lives, save families, save money. I hope I am opening the door on a discussion.'

Although her cancer was caught when it was confined to her milk duct so she did not need chemotherapy or radiotherapy, there was evidence of micro-invasion and its concomitant risk of spread. Now Julia is weighing the pros and cons of starting on a regime of hormone therapies which reduce the likelihood of recurrence. 'They're potentially life-saving drugs but they come with significant side effects for some women – joint pain, osteoporosis, trouble with your teeth, risk of uterine cancer and a running jump straight into menopause. I have young children to consider and it's hard to know what's best.'

While she is doing her research, she is embracing the healing power of nature; as she has done since she was a child growing up in the Peak District. She managed her first walk the day after she got home from hospital. 'I was just in the garden but being outside listening to the birds and feeling close to the trees is very rejuvenating. Nature repairs us emotionally too. The walk was appropriately gentle but still made me feel as if I was moving forward.'

Julia also underwent the 'DUTCH' test for her documentary (which stands for Dried Urine Test for Comprehensive Hormones). This found evidence of elevated stress levels 'like I am running away from a white tiger all the time,' she says. She puts that down to the pressures of her busy career and is now determined to reconfigure her work-life balance. 'I'm not saying stress causes cancer, or that it's sugar or obesity. Genetics or pure bad luck can be the root. It can be a combination of those factors – or just one of those things. But if I have a palette of knowledge I can make adjustments to my life that will help me.'

'I love making television but it's impossible to hear the words "you have cancer" and not think about your life in a completely different way. I have asked myself how I want to live from now on. You can't face your own mortality and not do that.'

Julia has been to see a counsellor who specialises in therapy for cancer patients and has taken Zeph to a support group for children whose parents have cancer. The outcome of both was a sense that she needs to be completely present for her children. 'They're gorgeous and though I have not missed much of their lives through my work – I have always prioritised assemblies, sports days and nativity plays – the past year has magnified the sense that this is a special time in their lives. They're only little and I want to be as close to them as possible.'

As a consequence, Julia has now formally introduced her children to her new boob. 'My daughters were examining it and said, "Mummy, it looks different and it's not as soft", I said, "Yes, my loves, but it's here. And so am I."'

Julia Bradbury: Breast Cancer and Me will air on 26 April at 9pm on ITV and the ITV Hub