
HAPPY MAMMOGRAM! **CINDY CHUPACK**

On my 40th birthday I got a mammogram.

Not as a gift. And not as a celebration, in the way that you might get a tattoo on your birthday, or go skydiving. It wasn't something I always wanted to do. I simply had a routine appointment at Sloan-Kettering in New York, and it happened to be my 40th birthday, and I didn't appreciate the lameness of the timing until the receptionist asked for my date of birth.

As she wished me a happy birthday, I was reminded of a time, decades earlier, when I first moved to Los Angeles. I was taking a standup comedy workshop, and it quickly became clear that I was a better writer than performer, so a girl in the class asked me to write jokes for her. And that girl was... nobody you've heard of because she wasn't that good, and neither were my jokes.

But by way of thanking me, she took me to this trendy restaurant, and for some reason she showed up looking like she hadn't showered for days, and her greasy blonde hair was under a scarf. She was slightly strange to begin with, but she usually showered, so this seemed odd. Especially since we were at a trendy restaurant of her choosing.

Now maybe you're thinking this is going to be about how she was getting chemo and losing her hair, thus the scarf. It's not that poignant of a story.

It's about my birthday, because she decided to lie and tell our waiter it was my birthday so he would bring us a free dessert, and as he and the rest of the wait staff were singing, I remember thinking what a sad fake birthday this was. Why would I be out with my one weird friend (who didn't even shower) on my birthday? Where were the rest of my fake friends? And my fake boyfriend? And the fake gifts? Even back then, with no fabulousness to back me up, I felt too fabulous for that fake birthday.

And now, at 40, I was definitely too fabulous to be getting a mammogram on my actual birthday. But there I was at Sloan-Kettering, putting on the cotton robe and waiting for my name to be called.

Clearly I wasn't thinking about the fact that it would be my birthday when I made the

appointment. I have some close friends who are breast cancer survivors and they all benefited greatly from early detection, so I am a believer in the power of the breast sandwich. That's what it looks like when you get a mammogram, by the way. Especially if you have large breasts, which I do. I don't say that to brag. I always wanted perky breasts, but I was blessed (or cursed) with large ones.

Of course, I did not know how large they were until, at age 37, I got my first mammogram, and they were spread out before me in all their flat, fleshy glory. In fact, I did go skydiving once, when I was 17, and I can tell you that looking down at the ground from 3500 feet was not as scary as looking down at my breast sandwich. So my advice to women who want to live longer and be healthier and happier: Do not avoid mammograms, but do avoid looking down when getting one.

Since that first mammogram I had at 37 (which, thankfully, came back normal), my health insurance changed its policy so that you had to be 40 to get a mammogram -- even though you don't have to be 40 to get breast cancer, thank you very much. In fact, that's what I argued to some poor, overworked insurance claims person when I called to see why I had to wait. She explained that insurance requirements vary state to state, carrier to carrier, blah blah blah, so anyhow, that's how I came to be at Sloan-Kettering on my 40th birthday.

Well, that, and also, I was getting married in a month, and my life was so full of appointments and plans that I didn't really think about what I was scheduling, or when. I only thought about how I could check something, anything, off my to-do list, and eliminating the possibility of breast cancer was something I was eager to check off.

Only that's not what happened.

The appointment itself went fine, especially since I knew not to look down this time around. And the rest of my birthday was lovely. (Where is there to go but up after a mammogram, really?) But the next day I got a call from Sloan-Kettering saying something was irregular with my left breast, and I needed to come back as soon as possible.

"Irregular" and "as soon as possible"... even "left breast" are not words you want to hear from a doctor's office. You don't want a breast singled out. Breasts come in pairs, and when all is going well, they are treated as pairs.

I immediately began seeing my life as a bad TV movie. I would be a bald bride walking down the aisle, and everyone would be saying how brave I was instead of how beautiful and happy. I imagined the wedding planning getting derailed by doctor's appointments, maybe even the wedding itself getting derailed, maybe the wedding being moved up so I could get married before I left the planet. By the time I called my fiancé at work (forty seconds later) I was in tears and practically writing my obit.

This was not the first time I'd assumed the worst when it came to my health. At 15 in

the town where I grew up, Tulsa, Oklahoma, I'd secretly plotted for a week about how to get to Planned Parenthood to see if I had a sexually transmitted disease. I finally rode my bike there (not a short ride) to learn that not only did I not have the disease... I did not have sex. Or "penetration," as the nurse called it. When I asked what that meant exactly, it became clear to her (and me) that the naked fumbling I'd done recently did not count, and to add insult to virginity, she said the blister I was concerned about was most likely from my thighs rubbing together when I walked. So I had cellulite, not syphilis.

Despite that early lesson on not jumping to conclusions, I leapt. In my mind, if not in my breast, I had cancer. Or at least, the possibility of cancer. And in that uncertainty, I understood what it meant to be terrified. To know that one test, one call from a doctor, could change your life forever.

Thankfully, my fiancé calmed me down. He said, "Not on my watch. Nothing is going to happen to you on my watch." That was so sweet and comforting, and as he held me in his arms that night, I thought, "Who the hell does he think he is? A superhero?! You can't stop cancer from happening, no matter how much you love someone!"

In my fear, I felt like I was *totally and irreversibly on my own*. Those words have echoed in my ears ever since my skydiving instructor said, "When you leave this plane, you are totally and irreversibly on your own." It wasn't a tandem jump I did. It was a static cord, so you were, in fact, *on your own*. And as I floated past the soft green grass of a landing field where you were supposed to land, and headed toward the parking lot of metal cars, where you were *not* supposed to land, I realized "on your own" is not the best place for me to be.

In my defense, although I was steering (there were cords you could pull to turn slightly right or left), there was a giant arrow on the ground which the people who worked there turned to point you in the right direction, and the parking lot was in the direction the giant arrow was pointing. What I failed to notice (since I was *totally and irreversibly on my own*) was that, at a certain point, they turned the arrow in the opposite direction so that I would be heading into the wind, which naturally slows you down. But by the time I noticed, it was too late. I was too low. I remember people yelling supportive things like, "Don't land on my car!" and I remember that instead of the five-point landing we had practiced over and over (feet, calf muscle, thigh muscle, buttocks, pushup muscle) I did a one-point landing, on my butt, directly onto the gravel.

So I was not so good on my own. And cancer seemed like something you had to do on your own because in the end, it's a battle inside your own body.

My fiancé went with me to the follow-up appointment, and this time when I got the mammogram, it was all about the left breast. There were more angles, and more care was taken to get the X-rays exactly right. Then we were told to wait in a special room for results. There was another couple in the room. They were older. They seemed like they'd been through this before, like this testing and waiting was part of their lives now, and I

feared we might be destined to become people for whom this would become routine as well.

After what seemed like an eternity (twenty minutes?), the nurse asked me to follow her back into the exam area. I remember that my fiancé did not want to let go of my hand. I thought they might need more film taken, but instead, a female radiologist was waiting to see me. She was sitting in front of my X-rays, which were black and blue and lit from behind.

My heart dropped. But she immediately alleviated my worries. She said I was fine. She showed me what had troubled her in the first X-ray, and how the new ones had confirmed that it was just something on the film, or the angle at which the photo was taken... To be honest, I'm not sure what she said. I don't think I heard anything after, "You're fine."

So what I learned at 40, a few weeks from my wedding, was that my fiancé would indeed be a good partner in sickness and in health. He dropped everything to be by my side, and when I emerged from the exam area to tell him I was okay, he cried. It was the first and only sign that he was as worried as I was. If he'd had tears and fears before that, he'd kept them to himself.

I also got a tiny taste of what so many of my friends with cancer have gone through and continue to go through every time they see a doctor, and for all of the anxious hours and years in between. In fact, I feel ridiculous telling this story in light of the real drama my friends and their partners and families have bravely faced. But I think it made me a better person, to understand how precious health is, and how everything could change in an instant, and how, even though the people who love you can't stop difficult things from happening, they will be there when you need them, every scary step of the way.

So maybe cancer does not mean that you're *totally and irreversibly on your own*. Maybe it actually clarifies, like an X-ray, what's inside of you, and who is in this with you.

For more on mammography, click on over to SU2C Mag's [science section](#)

Cindy Chupack has won three Golden Globes and an Emmy for her work as a writer/executive producer of HBO's *Sex and the City*. Prior to that, Cindy wrote for *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Coach*, and a bunch of failed series only her parents would watch. She is currently writing a pilot for NBC (a one-hour romantic comedy anthology), and her first screenplay (the adaptation of Nick Hornby's novel, "How to Be Good," with Laura Ziskin producing for Miramax).

In addition, she has written humorous essays about dating and relationships for *O, The Oprah Magazine* (where she currently has her own column), *Glamour* (where she had a

column), Harper's Bazaar, Allure, People, Self, Real Simple, Slate and the New York Times (including a recent piece for their "Modern Love" column). Her magazine work led to the creation of her book, "The Between Boyfriends Book: A Collection of Cautiously Hopeful Essays," which was a New York Times bestseller that has been translated into nine languages.

No longer between boyfriends, Cindy lives in Los Angeles with her husband and their St. Bernard rescue, Tink. For more information on Cindy or her book visit <http://www.betweenboyfriends.com>

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