

The Appearance of Choice

By Aimee Burke Valeras

I cupped my breasts, feeling the soft warmth in my hands. I looked down at them, and then at my profile in the mirror.

I think back, with a wistful smile to the day I first met these precious breasts. They seemed to appear overnight, 24 hours before the first day of sixth grade. I squeezed myself into three extra-small sports bras, willing these two unwelcome bumps to resemble the cardboard flatness of childhood. With a rail-thin body, hiding my newly-disfigured torso wasn't easy, so I picked out the baggiest of shirts to veil them.

In the ninth grade, with the images from *Seventeen* and MTV and society's unrealistic portrayal of beautiful women thoroughly permeating the air I breathed, I unleashed the fleshy swells. I realized, rather abruptly, that decent-sized breasts on an otherwise shapeless body could work to my advantage. They weren't perfect by any means, in fact, the right one seemed to be growing twice as quickly as the left, but I flaunted them in all their asymmetry.

And they served their purpose, I must admit. I heard that Jack Ramsey announced in the locker room that he was thinking of asking me to the prom. The other guys conceded I would be an acceptable choice: "She's a little too brainy, but she's got a nice rack." So these knockers earned me a prom date with a B-list athlete, and just to spite him, the neckline of my dress practically reached my chin.

I was eighteen when I found a small lump on the inside of my left breast. It was hard and so close to my ribs; it could have been mistaken for a knobby bone. But I never met my grandmother because she died of breast cancer the year before I was born, so I took this jellybean centered in the smaller of my boobs seriously. My mother squeezed my hand as the doctor produced a large, thick needle to stab right into the center. A nurse held my breasts spread apart during the procedure, as though they were going to spring straight up in the air and throw the needle off course. The doctor aspirated the tumor, but the needle came up empty. She extracted the needle and folded her hands in her lap, giving me a pathetic half-smile. My mother squeezed my hand tighter, which communicated that she didn't know whether to expect good or bad news.

"The needle biopsy was unremarkable." Unremarkable? This bitch is insulting my boobs!

"You have a fibrous tissue in your breasts. That's another way of saying you are just one of those women with lumpy breasts. Nothing to worry about!" She briskly stood up, patted me on the knee and exited the room. Lumpy breasts? Lucky me, I'll add that to lopsided and unremarkable.

Ten years later, these breasts served a purpose far greater than earning me a date to the prom or filling out a C-cup. For a full year, I nursed my daughter, nourishing her with the milk my body produced. I cherished the closeness of her body against mine, especially in the middle of the night when it seemed as though we were the only two people alive in the world. When

her lips would find their target and her suckle would slow as my milk came in, her eyes would get heavy lidded, dazed and blissful.

Now, another ten years later, I stand in front of the mirror peering closely at my breasts, the symbolism of my womanhood, my nurturing femininity, me. The doctor's words, this time less patronizing and far more serious, are echoing in my mind. "Stage 3 cancer. Your best chance is a double-mastectomy, followed by chemotherapy and radiation. That is my recommendation, but the choice is yours. It will be a warpath, but it is worth the fight."

Why do physicians always speak in terms of war? I am not at war with my body. I can't believe, as I look in the mirror at the same body I've looked at every day for 38 years, a little more saggy and wrinkly, that there is a deadly toxin inside me trying to kill me. I see only me.

"Only you can make this choice," she said again. Yet everyone acts as though there is no choice. Of course I will massacre my flesh, infuse poison into my blood, sacrifice my mousy brown curls, burn the cells underneath my skin. There is no question, in the loving eyes of my parents, my brothers, my friends, my husband or the innocent eyes of my daughter. There is so much left to live for. Of course there is only one choice. ...

But there is a choice. I meet the eyes of the woman looking back at me in the mirror. Those eyes look suddenly older, wiser. I am still cupping my breasts, which are still beautiful despite the cancer they house. They are a part of me, of the woman I am. The woman in the mirror nods at me in reluctant agreement. Tears spring to our eyes, as we realize, together, what this means. There is a choice.

My hands move from my breasts to a tight grip around my chest, as if giving myself the supportive hug I need to tell my family my decision, and to start my good-byes.

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