

ME AND MY BLESSED BOSOMS

How do you recover from living with breast cancer? Here, seven women share their experiences. Interviews by Dawn Chapman and Ute Diefenbach. Photographs by Katharina Mouratidi

'I'D HAVE DIED IN TWO YEARS'

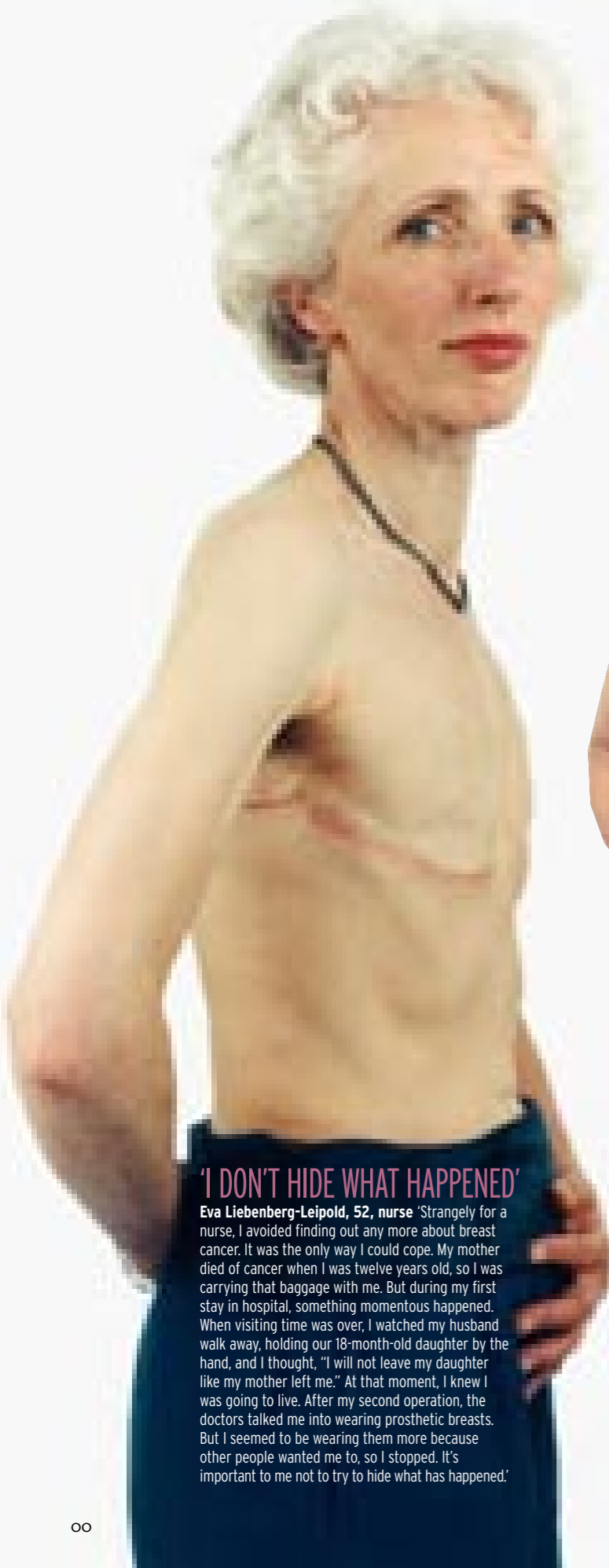
Rosemarie Triebe, 62, clerk 'Of course, there have been times when I've felt low. After my first mastectomy in 1978, my husband couldn't bring himself to touch me. But meeting so many beautiful, confident women who'd also lost a breast made me brave enough to say to him, "If you don't stop treating me like this, I'm going to find someone else." Nine years later, after my second mastectomy, he said he just wanted me to live and that he loved me as I am. After the operation, I decided to have prosthetic breasts. I've always been flat-chested, so I thought I'd have the breasts I'd always dreamed of. I only take them off when I shower. They're warm, move with my body and wobble when I run. If I hadn't had my first operation, doctors told me I'd have been dead within two years.'

'IT'S NOT AS BAD AS LOSING A FOOT'

Delia Geyer, 49, communications trainer 'It's tragic to be diagnosed with breast cancer but, as I do a lot of sport, I told myself that losing a breast wouldn't be as bad as losing a foot and not being able to run. In the end, though, I just had the lump removed rather than the whole breast. That was seven years ago. I knew that, because it had been detected early, my chances of survival were good, but I was frightened the cancer would return. It was at night that what I call the "black dog" of terror came. Then, last year, I had a lump removed from my other breast. I found it hard to be around people who were afraid of cancer and treated me as though I would be dead next week. It was much more helpful to talk openly about my illness or have a big hug from my husband. Now I'm back at work, my breasts look great and the scars hardly show. The fear of a third lump is always there, but I sleep peacefully.'

'I HAD A CAST MADE OF MY BREAST'

Barbara Kettner, 38, historian 'I thought it might help if I could work out how I'd got breast cancer. But there are so many different theories - for instance, that it's pure chance or due to an unhealthy lifestyle - and most annoyed me as they just make you feel guilty. In the end, I thought, "It's shitty having cancer, but I've got it and either me or the cancer can live - and it's going to be me." Three years ago, my partner and I said goodbye to my breast, stroked it, took photos and even had a plaster cast made to remember it by. I wasn't interested in reconstruction, but wanted to give myself a year to think about it. That was up long ago and I still haven't decided. I wear a prosthesis sometimes, so it's not obvious that a breast is missing, which gives me the option of choosing whom I talk to about my illness.' >



'I DON'T HIDE WHAT HAPPENED'

Eva Liebenberg-Leipold, 52, nurse 'Strangely for a nurse, I avoided finding out any more about breast cancer. It was the only way I could cope. My mother died of cancer when I was twelve years old, so I was carrying that baggage with me. But during my first stay in hospital, something momentous happened. When visiting time was over, I watched my husband walk away, holding our 18-month-old daughter by the hand, and I thought, "I will not leave my daughter like my mother left me." At that moment, I knew I was going to live. After my second operation, the doctors talked me into wearing prosthetic breasts. But I seemed to be wearing them more because other people wanted me to, so I stopped. It's important to me not to try to hide what has happened.'



'FINDING A BIKINI IS A DRAMA'

Brigit Flecken, 43, former manager in a reprographics company 'I can never forget that I have lost my breast. Every day, when I am washing or getting dressed, I'm confronted with this unalterable situation. I had four operations to get rid of the tumour in 1999. I opted for reconstructive surgery but the silicone implant had to be taken out after I got an infection. It looked horrible, anyway - my breast was uneven. I now wear a prosthetic breast in my bra. Clothes are fine, but it's always a drama to find a bikini that fits. The hardest thing is that no one wants to talk about cancer. It makes me feel isolated, so I often visit chat rooms. After my operations, I did meet a woman I fancied, but before we'd even kissed I told her about my mastectomy. She said she couldn't handle the situation, which was very painful, but I like to think that, one day, the right woman will come along.' ▷



'NAKED, I HORRIFY PEOPLE'

Ute Mansfield, 40, office worker 'My son helped me cope with having breast cancer. I was 35 and a single mother and he was 11 years old. He was always there for me and, for his sake, I was determined to go on living. I found out I had cancer when I went for a breast reduction - I used to suffer from back problems because my breasts were very large. During the operation, the doctors discovered the tumour and I had my right breast removed. Since my illness, I've thought more about what I want to do with my life. If I don't want to do anything, I say so. It's important for me to take time out for myself to relax and recover my strength. Before, if anyone asked me to do this or that for them, I'd do it. These days, I'm not so inclined. But in other ways, I am more restricted - I like swimming in the nude, but people are horrified when they see me undressed. That is really difficult.'



'I DON'T TAKE THINGS FOR GRANTED'

Christiane Beyer, 45, project manager for a marketing company 'I decided to have a silicone implant as I just wanted to get back to normal life and have a breast to put into my bra rather than padding. But the doctor told me it's hard to get the size and sagging of the breast right during reconstructive surgery. My breasts are now a bit uneven and the reconstructed one is less sensitive, but I can live with that. I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1998. My mother died of cancer, so I always checked my breasts before bed. I found a pea-size lump when I was seven months pregnant; it took a year and three doctors to find out it was malignant. I was furious, but I also felt justified. The main thing now is that I'm still here for my daughter. Her father had already left me before I discovered the tumour. Sometimes I think the stress of the break-up and my mother dying may have brought on the cancer. But I now have a new partner, who loves my body. I feel happier than I've ever been as I no longer take things for granted.' ■

WITH THANKS TO FRANKFURTER RUNDSCHAU MAGAZIN