

Half a Woman

You have to take off your wedding ring before surgery. I remembered that as we were rushing around at 6am, trying to get out of the house on time for me to check in at the hospital. There was a lot to remember that morning: what clothes to bring, my health card (but no wallet), the book, pen and paper, my glasses, a quick drink of juice in that last hour I could eat or drink anything. Then there were the big hugs, too many, it made me late, as the boys stood and watched me walk into the hospital. The line was short that time of day. The usual questions, the hand sanitizer, stand in the footprints at the elevators. Then I'm there on the second floor and it's just like the last time, except it's a new hospital, a brighter and friendlier place and throughout the morning during surgery prep we all get to know each other a bit.

Surgery then gets delayed due to someone else's emergency taking over some rooms, but I have a bed to lie on and a book and the hope that mine won't be canceled today. Today, I'm lucky. I'm rolling into the surgical theatre at 5pm as the nurse holds an oxygen mask and asks me to think of a place I like to go. And again, it isn't heaven, I don't know where it is but I wake up in the recovery room later, half a woman.

I have bilateral breast cancer. With 3 lumpectomies and an excision, there is a lot less of me there now. I didn't realize when I first had surgery just what was going to be leaving me...all I could think of was *the cancer is leaving me*. I wasn't offered plastic surgery at my first surgery but I was for the second. I wavered. It was never going to be the same and I didn't want to get caught in a place of trying to make it be. My surgeon encouraged me though, to speak to the plastic surgeon, to be sure of my choice...so I sat in a robe in her office while she described what she would do in a series of surgeries. It was about matching their size, so they'd look more the same size.

I was a cultural studies major, I mean, grad school, I know, I understand the whole symmetry thing. That symmetry makes us more naturally attractive, they say, for mate selection, it's evolution, we learn... an advantage. That it's in our culture... I know. Some women fear not getting a husband, fear losing their own husband, just want to look in the mirror and feel good, see symmetry when clothed. When naked, too...some women have skin moved from their own belly, their baby bump, *up* to replace a part of breast, or a whole breast, there are silicon options and even 3-d nipple tattoos. One woman in my support group was told by her hospital that going flat after her mastectomy was not even an option, that's how normative reconstruction is. She did it because she felt she had to.

So the plan the plastic surgeon was outlining, as I sat in my robe at the edge of the consult table, was to move things around, to lift, arrange, cut out a piece of muscle from my back and move it to my front, something about a *spacer* and if I did that one I couldn't do some of my fitness things I love but there were other options too... and it all felt strange, alien to my body and I felt protective and a little defensive. My girls had been through some stuff lately...and the way they looked and felt? I wanted to accept them as they are. Make everyone accept them as they are. I wanted to stay whole just as I am.

At age 16, my mom enrolled us in a mother-daughter assertiveness self defense class, sponsored by the rape crisis centre in our town. In the first lesson, we all practiced saying no. Our teacher was a lovely, friendly, handsome woman whose nickname was Mike, and she coached us through. Louder! Say it Loud! We held up our fists as protection, we kicked, we shouted NO! As students, we tried not to laugh as we “attacked” each other in the drills, it felt funny to touch that way and at first we were apologizing for pushing at each other, lifting and flipping, going on the offense, the defense, but these were things we needed to do to each other to be ready for the world, by the end there were no apologies, no smiles. *No* came easily.

I used it, through high school, through college, at work, at parties, riding alone in the back of a cab or on line at a show, at conferences, at the library, at the pub, on the subway, in the park or in the myriad other places where men want to push women, I could push back. The word held power like, a force field around my body, a bodyguard for my girls, whom I loved. It worked in advocacy too...whether for a student or a colleague or for, myself, when the expected answer was yes but my mind said no, I thought of Ms. Mike guiding me as I kicked my leg. It's not always a yell, sometimes it's just nicely saying “This isn't for me.” Both take strength.

So when my surgeon asked if I'd decided to add the plastic surgery, the word came out again. I knew that most women probably don't say no to all that free beauty. I understand why they say yes and... I'd thought of saying yes too. But I want to keep my breasts as they are, maybe because *I'm* different too now. After walking through fire in chemo, radiation to come, having surgeries, going through it all...no. And I know I'll get another ask, if I am sure or if my no isn't just all the trauma of the past 6 months talking...that I'll be told I can always change my mind like some do and go back for a revision later, after. After all this is...over.

And this time I don't say *no* to my sisters who tell me to keep my options open, who seem worried about my symmetry, or worried that I will worry over it. I know it comes from a place of caring but I also wish there was more space for a caring validation that we're all worthy of love even without perfect symmetry and that those of us who've walked through the fire need most of all to know we are still whole, even after loss. In the booklet from the hospital this comes in *one single line, like poetry*, at the *very end of the very long section* on breast reconstruction options. And here's what it says:

“It is also ok to decide that you don't want any of these options.”

I couldn't remember where I'd left my ring. In the early-morning rush, it had slipped into the flow of our household, amidst pens and meeting notes, drawings, coffee mugs, rocks and sea glass, charger cords and stacks of books. It was somewhere special, I just knew it, but where? I went to sleep that night in a post-hospital haze, to wake up in the afternoon and reach over on the bedside table. The ring was there. Our house was quiet, the guys were out. I slid my ring onto my finger and sat in the silence contemplating my hands and then my whole body in itself, in my home and in the world. A body that grew into itself, that said the nos and also the yeses and married and moved and changed, that held closely another life, and another... a body that will grow *older* too, if I'm lucky.