

## *Sister by Virginia Hardee Silverman*

Anyone who saw us sitting in the bar might have assumed we were on a lesbian date that was going very badly. While Emily cried, I held her hand, not saying a word, listening to her snot-filtered words of fear and desperation. From time to time, I touched her hair, pushing it away from the edge of her face, giving her sobs full freedom to pull and push. Rod Stewart's newest single blared over the speakers, begging her to cry harder and louder. The table was littered with Kleenex, a white, wet sea of spent feeling.

My lunch-date's wispy blond hair fell across her small neck as she bent her head to hide her tears. Emily had just been diagnosed with breast cancer the week before. She was now trying to decide whether to amputate both of her breasts, eliminating the possibility of recurrence. The alternative was to hang on to the so-far-unaffected left breast and just deal with the afflicted side. Either option represented a huge loss. And I could feel every inch of her anger at life and God for doing this to her. I had faced the same decision four years earlier. I chose to go for broke and surrender both my breasts. Recurrence aside, symmetry proved important to me as well.

She sucked her swollen sinuses back into her throat so she could keep talking. "I just can't believe this is happening to me. I don't want to be cut up. I don't want to die, but I don't want the scars. I have always loved my breasts just like they are. And so have my boyfriends. Over the years, more than a few have told they're my best physical feature. How will I ever be comfortable being undressed in front of anyone again?"

Emily was a middle-aged woman who had not yet been married, had no children and no prospects for either. She had endured three failed relationships in five years—and that was with her breasts intact. Without them, Emily was thoroughly convinced that no one would want her. She perceived her diagnosis as a life sentence for loneliness. All I could do was try to listen to her and not remember my fear of the future. If we were both in trauma, I was sure we'd never make it out of the restaurant.

I repressed the memories of my own panic and tried to reassure her. "I know you feel this way now, but you have to remember the most important thing is to save your life. The cancer is in three quadrants, which means that a lumpectomy is not an option. You

want to live. That's all that matters. You want to avoid having to go through this again, so giving up the other breast will prevent you from having to face this horrible decision again." It would also reduce the 40 percent chance of recurrence that she faced now to almost nothing. She had already had two lumpectomies and radiation on the breast that was the site of the recurrence. Her body had tolerated two surgeries and this would be a third. But, if she chose the most aggressive course of treatment, it would be her last. Breast surgery at least.

My words rang hollow as I remembered how frightened I was four years ago. At the time, I didn't have anyone to help me through this process. I remembered sitting alone at my computer searching for information and direction. The only person I had known with breast cancer, Sally, had died three months before my diagnosis after an eight-year battle with the disease. I saw her whittle away to almost nothing, the result of a mastectomy, two bone marrow transplants, five rounds of chemo, and two brain surgeries. She had been my pathfinder, leaving crumbs along the way for me to follow when my time came. But, even with the memory of her wise personal choices to light my way, I felt blind and overwhelmed. I had needed someone living who could promise

life after the knife.

As a result, I made a promise to reach out whenever I could to help other women who faced these decisions. I knew what they would experience intimately, and I was committed to helping any way I could. I decided to move onto the reconstruction phase of the treatment.

"You know, I chose to have my reconstruction process start during the surgery so that I when I woke up I would have some shape. I just didn't want to come to and feel concave. The implants I have feel natural; silicone is totally safe and has a much more natural shape. They even bounce when I jog!" She laughed a little then, perhaps the light of a normal future filled with exercise and luncheons and shopping sprees fleetly in front of her tear-filled eyes for just a moment.

"When you walked in here, I never would have guessed that you had a double mastectomy. You look great." Yes, I had had a double mastectomy and now was the proud owner of two Inamed 153 silicone implants, 350 ccs each, which was an increase of one whole cup size before my diagnosis. I was determined to see

some sort of upside in cancer.

"Yep, there are some days that I forget I ever had the surgery or cancer. Don't get me wrong; when I get out of the shower and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I look like a Thomas Guide map of Los Angeles, but as far as the way I feel, the way the implants feel inside me, I can let myself forget sometimes. At least a little time each day. That's a good thing."

She smiled again. A little smile. Her breath was calmer and stronger now. Her eyes, although red-rimmed and edged with fear, were clearer and slightly determined.

Suddenly, I had an idea.

"Do you want to see them? My breasts, I mean. If you're interested, we could go into the ladies room and I could show you what the scars look like after four years. Hell, you can even touch them if you want to. I won't feel it. One of the things that happens after the surgery is that you lose all the nerves in the front of your breasts, so it doesn't really matter to me if you want to see what you will look and feel like afterwards."

We started giggling like two schoolgirls who were about to share a really juicy secret. "Check please," Emily said loudly and we both laughed.

We left our sweating cocktails on the table and moved with fierce determination toward the ladies room. We went directly to the handicapped stall. It seemed appropriate under the circumstances. Emily stared as I unbuttoned my blouse without the least hesitation. She seemed eager to catch a glimpse of what she would look like on the other side of the surgery.

We giggled like conspiring chickens, wondering how we would explain this if someone reported what we were doing. I had never deliberately shown my breasts to another woman before. I found it strangely exhilarating, seeing the look of childish anticipation on Emily's face. Sort of like the way we looked at the dead, splayed frog in 7th grade science class. It was funny, it was horrible, but mostly it was interesting.

Just as I opened my blouse to reveal my 36Cs, we heard the squeak of the ladies room door as two women entered. We stood

like mannequins in the handicapped stall, biting our lips and trying to stifle our giggles. The absurdity of the moment wasn't lost on either of us.

When the women who had interrupted our intimate show-and-tell finished touching up their lipstick and headed back into the restaurant, I gently caressed my scars with the tips of my fingers. "See, they're almost gone," I pointed out. "You can only see them if you look closely." Emily leaned in, trying to find the re-sewn skin. "Wow, they look fantastic," she said. Almost with envy. Almost with admiration. I was proud to show her my bulging badges of courage.

I arched my back. "Go ahead. You can touch them if you want." She reached out with one finger and poked the side of my left implant. "God, they feel so natural. I can't believe it."

"That's what good silicone will do for you," I answered wisely. I had been down this path before and was pleased to be able to show her the trail. Her panic was subsiding. I could tell she could picture herself with my breasts, or her version of my breasts. I could tell she could see herself living beyond the surgery.

"So, what are you going to do?" I asked as I re-buttoned my blouse. "Are you going to go for it?"

She paused a moment. Her swollen, gray eyes dropped back to my chest and rose finally to meet my gaze. "Yeah, I think I can do this. I want to live, and I don't want to have to go through this again." I nodded, understanding exactly how she felt.

"How about we finish our beers and talk about your new cup size? Some days I wish I had gone for Ds. How about you?" I put my arm around her small shoulders and coached her back into the crowded room.