

My profound, challenging, surprisingly joyful, life-changing year

Róisín Ingle



It's time for the Unexpected Christmas Eve Catch Up. You know how it goes. You walk down Grafton Street or Patrick Street or Shop Street getting the last of your bits and bump happily into a fond acquaintance. At the cheese counter, pondering the Brie and the blue, you meet an old friend you haven't seen in ages. Just like that you get to catch-up briefly against a backdrop of twinkling lights and carol singers and warm fuzzy feelings. Joy to the world.

So let's have an Unexpected Christmas Eve Catch Up. I haven't written a personal column for around a year. I'm not so deluded as to think anyone noticed but maybe some readers wondered where I went and what I was up to.

Here's what happened. The abridged version, anyway. One night in October last year I found a piece of rough skin, not a lump, underneath my left nipple. I dutifully went to a doctor and was referred to the Breast Clinic in the Mater public hospital. They did lots of mammograms and an ultrasound, and a biopsy, and that same morning, a surgeon told me they had found several tumours in my left breast. I was shocked and upset, of course I was, but I also thought "ah, so now it's my turn". I have several friends who've been diagnosed with breast cancer in the last 20 years. The surgeon said I'd have a rough year and then all would be well.

As is often routine, I was sent for some more scans and on December 8th I was told the cancer had spread to my bones and my lymph nodes. Things were different now. I moved from the Breast Clinic to be treated in the main oncology department in the Mater. The shock was deeper. The shock led me to my fridge where I stared at a chilled bottle of posh white wine and hoped that pouring it down my gullet before hiding under the duvet would make it all go away. That's

when a wise internal voice told me wine was not a good path. I had to feel all my feelings rather than numb them, even if it was with a very nice Pouilly-Fumé. I gave up alcohol instantly and forever in that moment. I loved my wine, really loved it, but this new way of life has been liberating as has ditching social media. I am grateful for that and for so much in what has turned out to be a profound, challenging, surprisingly joyful and life-changing year.

There have been difficult days. My partner and I had to tell our children, two teenage girls looking forward to Christmas. The four of us sat in a huddle on our sofa where they cried and quite reasonably asked "what is even the point of Christmas any more?" Ten days later we were on our way to a carol service in St Patrick's Cathedral when I slipped on a

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wet pavement and broke my ankle. There was an ambulance ride to the Mater and an operation to fix the fracture by inserting titanium rods and a plate.

I came home on crutches just in time for my first alcohol-free Christmas Eve in decades. I laughed more that night in my sister's house drinking kombucha (she lives in Ranelagh) than I did during all our previous champagne-fuelled Christmas Eves. Christmas was far from pointless. It was, my daughter said afterwards, the best one ever.

Over the next while I did everything my gentle, compassionate, genius of an oncology consultant Emily Harrold told

me to do. She said she was hopeful the cancer could be managed for "long years", which sounded good to me and still does. I started treatment, immune targeted therapy, while waiting for the ankle to heal properly. Eventually, I began chemotherapy in the Mater's cancer day ward and let me tell you about the beautiful people there: about Albert and Alex and Noel and Camille and Sheelu and Gina and everyone else, the most emotionally intelligent and skilled medical professionals you could hope to meet. Chemotherapy is not pleasant but they helped me through it every week for months.

A lot more happened. I got a bug called C.diff, which caused acute kidney damage and a bout of e-coli – I wouldn't recommend. In February, when my hair began falling out, my brilliant brother-in-law Killian came to the hospital with his clippers to shave it all off. I was in hospital again, by the way, because while rushing to go to the bathroom on my crutches, I'd fallen down the stairs, busting my other leg, an injury that required another operation.

After that skin graft surgery, newly sheared and high on the effects of some powerful drugs, I decided to ask my partner of 24 years to marry me. I risked further injury by getting down on one knee on February 29th, Leap Year Day, at a fancy dinner in the Garden Room of the Merrion Hotel. He said yes. I finished the chemotherapy and we got married in Roberta's in Temple Bar in early July. I walked down the aisle with my mother to Gilbert O'Sullivan's Matrimony wearing a pink tulle dress with enormous sleeves by Anne O'Mahony. My wig was styled by hair guru Stephanie Nwambu. It was, apart from the day my daughters were born, the best day of my life.

So there's our Unexpected Christmas Eve Catch Up. The immunotherapy treatment is ongoing and I feel wonderful, thank you for asking. I am living with

and managing this disease. My once long, thick highlighted hair is now short, thick and grey. (I'm "slaying" the look, my daughters tell me.) My overwhelming feeling is of gratitude: for modern medicine, for my mother, for my siblings, for my friends, for my colleagues, for my neighbours, for my daughters and for my gorgeous husband. Queenie, my husband's mother, is no longer a mother-in-law-in-waiting. She's an actual mother-in-law and thrilled by that development. I sleep well and laugh a lot and now that I am permanently sober, my scrabble game has greatly improved.

Last month, at a raucous Thanksgiving dinner in my friend Ruth's house, I randomly plucked this Margaret Atwood quote from a "jar of gratitude". "After everything that's happened how can the world still be beautiful? Because it is". Margaret is correct. And in writing this piece I've also been inspired by another sage woman Maeve Binchy. In her sensible and cheering book *Aches and Pains*, Maeve wrote that if those of us with medical issues want people to treat us a certain way, we should remember that we are the ones calling the shots. "All we have to do is send out the right vibes".

I want to send out the right vibes. I don't want to be defined by this health eventuality. Concern and affection are lovely but I don't need sepulchral sympathy or unasked for advice, no matter how well-intentioned. We all know by now that the words we use around cancer and other illnesses are important. I am not fighting or battling. I am not winning or losing. I am living.

I hope whatever hard things you might be facing, you find your own way to live. Now here comes another Christmas. Joy to the world. See you at the cheese counter. ●

roisin.ingle@irishtimes.com

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