



Heather and Mark Wright were resolved to face whatever came—together.

# MY CANCER, OUR LIVES

*In this diary of a wife's breast cancer ordeal, a couple share how their different ways of dealing with the challenge made for real triumph*

BY HEATHER AND MARK W. WRIGHT | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDY McMILLAN

## I Think I Feel Something

**[HEATHER]** I ran my middle finger over it again. I touched it once but didn't really want to touch it again. It didn't hurt, but it was real. I checked the same spot on my right side, thinking: *Surely, there must be another random lump on the other side of my body,*

*just under my right armpit because that's the way God does things, in twos.* But there was nothing on the right side. I asked for a second opinion: "Honey, do you feel this?" I leaned closer to Mark. He sat up. I guided his index finger to the spot. Sounds sexy, doesn't it? It wasn't. "Yeah," he said. "There's something there."

HAIR AND MAKEUP: JOVETA GORDON/KENBARBOZA.COM

We looked at each other, then looked away. In the seconds that followed I did what I always do—go worst-case scenario: Cancer, chemo, suffering, death, motherless children, some trick sleeping in my bed with my husband, me coming back from the dead just to haunt her ass while also providing guardian-angel-like support to the children. The whole trip took me 20 seconds. It took me half that long to snap out of it. Internal hysteria, external calm. When I spoke again, it was with focus, belying my inner panic. "I have my annual next week. I'll just have my doctor look at it." I paused. "Or I guess I could call him tomorrow."

"Call him tomorrow," Mark said. He was being fake-calm, too. That scared me.

**[MARK]** In 13 years of marriage, I have never—ever!—turned down Heather's request to feel her breasts. But on this particular night, I wished I had. I knew it was a tumor, too, or something that needed to be checked out by a doctor very soon. That's why I insisted, as calmly as I could, that she call the doctor first thing in the morning.

People talk about that empty feeling you get in your gut when you're faced with fear. I'd dreaded this day for a long time. I knew her family's history. I recalled, with vivid fondness, Enee, her beautiful soul of a grandmother who had succumbed to lymphoma the day after Heather's thirty-second birthday. And her mother's sister, Aunt Chollie, whose indomitable spirit never wavered, even in her last days. And another aunt, that rambunctious and quick-witted Ruth, who was going through breast cancer treatment at that moment. And let's not forget her know-every-damn-thing uncle, the one who wears cowboy hats and cowboy boots that hurt his feet (he's from Jersey), who battled and beat stomach cancer. All of their faces flashed before me. Only my Jamaican pride kept me from bawling like a 43-year-old baby.

While Heather went straight to worst-case scenario—her kids being motherless and me giving away her love to some Beyoncé look-alike—I thought about an empty house and how I'd never give myself to another woman the way I gave myself to her.

## It's Cancer

**[HEATHER]** The doctor who gave me my diagnosis was an idiot. He sat across from us with scans of my breasts on the monitor behind him. Compared with other cancers, he said, "this will be a minor inconvenience." WTF? This guy was not my gyn, who would have dealt a softer blow. Mark was mad; I could tell. The doctor squirmed.

Over the next few weeks I would learn that Dr. Idiot was right, in some ways. My diagnosis presented no emergency. The tumor was small. Most of it was removed during biopsy. The potential that it had spread to nearby lymph nodes was small. (I would later learn that of the 14 lymph nodes removed, one tested positive for cancer.)

When you're diagnosed with breast cancer, if you're lucky, there are decisions you will have to make. If you're really lucky, you get to make them slowly: Do your research, pray, ask for opinions, pray. On the flip side, there are some diagnoses that

make decisions for you: Your tumor is too large for a lumpectomy... You will definitely need radiation or chemotherapy immediately.

I was really lucky, or rather, blessed. In the ten weeks between my diagnosis and surgery I was tested and retested several times—an ultrasound followed by an MRI-guided biopsy, heart tests, chest X-rays, blood tests and a test for the BRCA gene to see if my breast cancer was hereditary. All negative. With that information my surgeon, my oncologist and I decided to take an aggressive course of action to rid my body of the cancer and forbid its return. What would give me the least chance of recurrence? A double mastectomy and chemotherapy, no radiation. Chance of reoccurrence? 1 to 2 percent. Difficult for sure, but I was healthy and, at age 43, young (holla!).

**[MARK]** When you're asked to step into the doctor's office, you know the news ain't good. Heather and I sat, held hands. There was a nurse standing behind us, on alert. When the doctor used the C word I felt like I'd just been trampled on. It's not like getting just any bad news, like losing your job or even losing a close family member. This reality felt different because, well, it's your spouse, a part of you, the person whose pains and joys and disappointments and triumphs you feel. Hearing the C word you immediately feel powerless and you think about everything, and you ask questions, your mind races and you're mad at God and you're mad at yourself and you know that bad things happen to good people and all you want is to switch places with her.

## We Have to Tell the Kids

**[HEATHER]** The therapist advised me to be straightforward and honest with our children, to avoid saying things like "Mommy's never going to leave you." I had every intention of doing that, but in the moment, with Max's big eyes searching my face for truth, I lied. It was the only weapon I had to protect him.



From left: "Cancer treatment forces you to be still," Heather says. "I just liked sitting with Rufus." Heather and Mark wonder how deeply Max (left), 12, and Marco, 8, were affected by her diagnosis.

Max was 10 at the time. He and I were in his room doing something or other. It was quiet, so I jumped the gun and said that I had something important to tell him. I explained that I had gone to the doctor and there was something he needed to treat me for, a tumor. It would include surgery and some pretty strong medicine. I avoided the word *cancer* and I forced back tears and snot. I know now that Max saw through it. He was letting me off the hook when he said:

"The tallest man in the world had a tumor on the gland in his brain that stimulates growth," he interrupted. ▸



“That’s why he grew so tall.” And just like that he was done. He didn’t want to talk about it anymore. But he later told a friend that something was wrong with his mom, a confession that upset them both.

Marco was 7, so we told him small things and only the day before the cancer would actually affect his routine: Tomorrow Mommy is going into the hospital. Then later: The medicine Mommy is taking will make her hair fall out, so she’s just going to shave it all off. He found that one really funny. It’ll be years before we know how deeply Marco was affected, if at all.

**[MARK]** I told Danielle, who was 18 and a freshman in college, via telephone. I could be strong on the phone, like dads are supposed to be. I didn’t want to create a sense of panic in her, but the words that I spoke sounded nothing like the speech I had written in my head. “Mommy went to the doctor, and they’ve found something,” I remember saying. “Is she okay?” Danielle asked in a whisper. “Yes, yes, she’s okay. It’s...breast cancer, though.”

There was a long pause; at least it felt long. Then she said, “Do you want me to come home?” I told her it wasn’t necessary, but her reaction gave me strength. Maybe she sensed her Old Man needed a hand. At that moment, I thought, *She is so much like me, such a fixer.*

## Breaking the News

**[HEATHER]** I wanted to tell everybody, right away. I started with my sister. She works in oncology analytics at a major hospital in Atlanta. Aside from that she is the family caretaker; I knew she would know what to do, my Kidada. That’s why I couldn’t believe it when she started with the hysterics. I told her if she didn’t cut the crap, I would hang up. She pulled it together, and never lost it again.

I knew that telling my mother (Louise Keets) would be the most difficult. Since my father had died one year earlier, we tiptoed around her, thinking she was fragile. She wasn’t. She didn’t break. Not even when she learned one week later that she, too, had cancer—multiple myeloma. Yes, we went through treatment together. She is, in a word, *amazing.*

I told my sorors; they told the sisterhood. I was more confused about telling coworkers and neighbors. When and how to tell people became all Mark and I talked about, all we argued about. I needed my neighbors and friends to know. The kids’ teachers. I needed my soccer moms to know. I knew these good people would help us. They cooked, picked up the kids, took me to my appointments, took care of my family and of me.

**[MARK]** I didn’t want to tell a damn soul. Not my parents. Not my best friend. Nobody. I did tell my sister, Fiona, and my bosses,

because I’d be missing work, but that was it. Heather and I had never been further apart on any one thing in our entire marriage. She thought I was being ridiculously stubborn, selfish even. I did feel selfish—not for the stance I held, but for making her feel it wasn’t okay for her to tell whomever she wanted. This was her fight, after all. But I wanted to be left alone with my anger that my wife and the mother of my kids had cancer, that I couldn’t fix everything. The devil was working on us. Nothing I said to her about how I felt made sense—that is, when I actually opened my mouth and talked. So we stopped talking about it, and we got through it.

## The Day of Surgery

**[HEATHER]** Surgery was crack-of-dawn early. My friends and family had prayed for me around the clock. Text messages never stopped coming in. Only one negative thought permeated the peaceful spirit we’d cultivated. Only one, but it was the big one: the thought that I might slip away. From my surgeon, right there on the table; from my children; from my Mark. Every one of us at some point in life is going to have to trust a doctor for her own sake or for the sake of someone we love. Did I trust this surgeon? About as far as I could throw her. I trusted God more.

The deluxe package, I called it: a double mastectomy, with reconstructive surgery that included a TRAM flap, and then the insertion of a portacath for administering chemo in the coming months. I was prepped and wheeled into the presurgical area, where I was introduced to my medical team. I never expected to see someone I knew. One of the anesthesiologists turned out to be a fellow soccer parent. We’d hung out on the sidelines many times. We smiled at each other, awkwardly. He quietly asked the assigned anesthesiologist if he could step in, provided it was okay with me. He was professional and kind. The gesture made me cry then and it does now. Truth is, I needed to know somebody up in there. Good God, I needed a friend right then. And Good God sent me one. A friend with really, really good drugs.

**[MARK]** Scariest day of my life. Details come only in flashes now, but I remember the fear. I remember smiling as they wheeled her away. I remember her looking stronger than I felt. I remember putting on a brave face—but I was consumed with fear and, I suppose, doubt. Funny how those two always run together. I don’t remember any tears. I remember we kissed. I remember the long walk to the post-op room and her aunt and a friend of her mom’s being there to meet me. I remember this being the longest day. I remember the doctor coming out after surgery to tell us it was over and me swallowing hard, as if this nightmare couldn’t possibly be real.

## First Day of Treatment

**[HEATHER]** I wasn’t sick or tired or in pain, just emotionally exhausted. It’s a head trip to know that the medicine you must

take will make you sick. It’s a conundrum that makes me root for alternative medicine, for cures that make getting better easier.

The treatment itself was pretty anticlimactic. I received IVs of taxotere, carboplatin and herceptin, interspersed with saline—the first of six cocktails I would get throughout the summer, every three weeks. The first time takes the longest, six hours in my case, because they need to administer everything slowly to avoid adverse reactions. My nurse navigator advised me, in her fascinating southern drawl, to “Git you a giant slushy to sip on” during treatment, because chemo gives you a metallic taste in your mouth. I did. The slushy was worse than the tinge of gun metal in my mouth. For subsequent treatments I bought iced coffee. Bourgie.

The Benadryl they gave me in case of an allergic reaction made me itchy, then sleepy. So I slept and I’m 100 percent sure that I snored the entire time. There’s a hilarious viral video called “Sh\*t Cancer Patients Say” that captures the whole thing accurately. Google it.



**At left:** “When something like this happens, you think about how the whole family is affected,” says Mark. Clockwise from top: Mark, Louise Keets, Heather, Marco, Max and Danielle. **At right:** “This is us being silly, how we usually are,” says Mark. “There wasn’t opportunity to be like this during Heather’s battle—we missed it.”



**[MARK]** Make this as easy on her as you can. That was my mind-set. If she wanted me to sit by her side as she updated her CaringBridge blog or posted random Twitpics, do it. If she wanted me to get her lunch, do it. If she wanted no part of me while she went through this, do that too. Treatment One revealed to me, probably for the first time, that cancer doesn’t give a damn who you are, how you look or how much money you have. Sitting in the waiting area I got the sense that we were all cancer patients. As scared as I was, some people probably thought I might have been the one getting treatment. And, in one very strange sense, they’d be right.

## Life After Cancer

**[HEATHER]** I didn’t have any scars on my body before cancer. Not one. After surgery I felt like the bride of Frankenstein, pieced back together by modern medicine. That’s sort of what a TRAM flap reconstruction is: The doctors take muscle from your six pack and transfer it to your breasts to rebuild what was removed. In my case, they also added implants and later new nipples. I have scars now. They’re fading, even the big, ugly one where my portacath used to be. I love my body because it’s strong.

Prevention is one thing, but it’s not the goal. It can’t be, because cancer is too slippery. The goal is to be healthy in

every way so that if it happens to you, you are fighting with your healthiest body and mind, your healthiest relationships, your healthiest self.

**[MARK]** She has a scar right above her left breast where the portacath was. As the weeks and months pass, I see less and less of it. That scar is our reminder that we went through some --ish in 2012. There are other scars; they don’t mean a thing to me. What I see is my wife getting healthier and sexier by the day, and that’s all I care about. She has two very round, very perky “girls” now—and I enjoy looking at them. Her hair is back, not the locks I loved so much, but a shorter, goofier version that grows unevenly and will only stay in place with hair gel. She looks like she did when we lived in D.C. and she used to wear overalls. She’s back to work, being “the closer” on client pitches and doing the soccer mom thing again. She’s back to doing yoga, and jogging too.

The lingering effects of treatments show up when she gets out of bed in the morning, and she’s as stiff as I am after I

play soccer with the 20-year-olds. That’s the only time I “see” cancer now. That scar above her left breast, the one that will probably be invisible by the end of the year? Or other small ones I’m forgetting? I don’t see you.

I had an epiphany a year after our storm was over. It happened one Sunday morning while watching her take in the sights and sounds at my childhood church in Jamaica. I felt the moment coming on like a draft from an open window. We were on vacation—our first family vacation, actually—in Jamaica. That Sunday I looked at my wife swaying and singing along to the hymns I grew up on, looking so beautiful. If it’s wrong to lust in church, I don’t want to be right. Not now.

As I watched her clap her hands and sing, knowing she’d just come through one hell of a year, I was moved and overcome with gratitude.

That night as we were getting ready for bed, I told her that she’d looked great. I tell her this often.

“I did?” she asked, half smiling.

“Yup,” I answered. “I was checking you out in church, too.” □

**Heather and Mark W. Wright** live in Charlotte, North Carolina, with their three children and Rufus, their dog.