

# Uprooted

Category: Traumatized

written by Deborah Levin | November 12, 2023

It didn't happen all at once, as I thought it would. But it did happen when they said it would. One afternoon, a few days before my second chemotherapy infusion, I noticed some loose hairs on my computer desk. In the shower that evening, I spotted a bird nest-like cluster on the drain.

The next morning, I woke to find a fistful on my pillow. In a total panic, I ran to the mirror in my bathroom. I could hardly breathe.

This wasn't supposed to happen. I was using a cold cap during treatments, and though I was warned it wasn't always successful, we had every hope it would be. When we were discussing treatment options, I explained to my oncologist that losing my hair was my biggest fear. Not nausea or vomiting or neuropathy or any of the other side-effects she cited. There were drugs for that. No, it was all about my hair. My mother had died of breast cancer, and among the many strong memories I have of that time, the one that sticks with me the most, is the vision of her wearing brightly colored scarves to hide her bare head. I was never going to be that sick lady wearing a scarf.

The shedding, as it was euphemistically called, continued for the next two months, scaring me a bit more each time. Every day was a struggle, made that much more difficult by the loss of self that I felt. The woman whose reflection I saw in the mirror was not me. Synthetic hair fibers and powders did nothing to hide my shame. Luckily, it was winter, and I was able to hide my embarrassment under hoodies and beanies. When summer arrived, I wore baseball caps and wide headbands in a kaleidoscope of colors. I refused to wear scarves.

For the better part of a year, I never felt completely normal. I knew there was no guarantee my hair would grow back. I could only cross my fingers and wait. To my enormous relief, it did. These days, I can wash and dry it with ease to create my signature hairdo. Every time I pull a brush through my hair, I marvel at how tightly each strand is rooted to my scalp. I still feel nervous, though, and can't help but think that the trauma of that hair loss will live in those follicles forever.

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