

First Shower

Category: Stories

written by Kristen Knott | May 13, 2016

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“Do you need help getting undressed?” Jon asks from the doorway of our bedroom, one hand holding his BlackBerry, the other tucked into the front pocket of his baggy jeans. His head is slightly tilted, his eyebrows arched, highlighting his forehead wrinkles.

His phone vibrates, drawing his eyes from me to the incoming message. I wait.

Jon reads, ponders and then looks up, half-absorbed in what he’s just read, and registers that I’m still on the bed. His face lights up.

I now have his full attention.

“I think I can manage,” I say, “but I may need help with my shirt.”

I sit up and let my feet rest on the floor. Carefully keeping myself semi-erect, and holding my right arm bent across my tummy as if in an invisible sling, I stand and walk toward our bathroom with its glass-encased walk-in shower, which we built to accommodate the two of us.

“You must be excited to have your first shower,” says Jon, following me into the bathroom and shedding his clothes as he moves from the bedroom to the shower door.

Jon is brilliant but absentminded, always deep in his head and sometimes oblivious to his present surroundings. The odds are good that he won’t notice the discarded clothes after we shower. And I’m in no shape to pick them up.

As he helps me take off my shirt, I glance at his naked body. Jon playfully describes himself as a “skinny fat man.” He’s balding, with a broad, hairy chest and skinny legs, but I love every inch of him.

“I can’t wait to have clean hair,” I say, looking in the mirror at the messy bun that barely holds my unkempt hair. My eyes focus on the frayed, peeling corners of the gauze bandage that covers my chest. Then I glare at the two draining tubes that I must awkwardly hold in one hand while I disrobe; otherwise they will free-fall and dangle from the two tender holes that mark where their other halves penetrate my chest cavity and lie hidden underneath my pectoral muscle.

Disgusting!

These drains will be with me for another two weeks, and then a nurse will yank them out. My stomach turns at the thought that I’ll be awake for this procedure. I’m tired of draining the red and yellow fluid that accumulates in

the drains' bulbous ends, again and again.

When I look in the mirror, I desperately want to see "me" again—the independent, energetic me. It's been only a week since surgery, but I miss that image...I want it back. Everything's been turned upside-down.

It's easy to forget that I welcomed this surgery. *We* welcomed it. Terrified that cancer would spread through my body like it had through Lyn's. Jon and I never discussed it, but we were both thinking it. I refused to let Jon lose another wife to cancer, and if it meant removing a part of my body, then so be it.

The sound of running water lures me back to the present moment—to Jon, who waits for me in the shower.

"Do you want to sit or stand? What's easier?"

He closes the shower door and helps me settle onto the cedar bench. I guard my chest with my hand, terrified that the water will pelt down on my incision.

Suddenly I feel exposed. Every muscle in my back and arm feels tense, as if I've been kicked repeatedly in my shoulder blade. The pain never lets go; it's a constant ache.

I look again at my chest. My eyes follow the trickle of water that runs down my left breast and collects on the end of the nipple, then pools in larger drops that fall one by one, like a leaky tap, onto my thigh.

I study the void where my right breast once was—where I massaged the flesh, in this very shower, the morning when I discovered the lump. The lump that was first imaged, then painfully biopsied and renamed a "tumor" and then, fifteen days later, cut from my body—everything removed to ensure clear margins for a pathology report I now wait on. Half of my chest is a concave hollow, covered in tape and medical gauze that runs from the large freckle in the middle all the way to my underarm, where the draining tubes now hang.

How can Jon bear to look at me? How can I be sexy to him? I'm supposed to be in the prime of my life. We just found each other. It's been only five years. We're still newlyweds. How does he muster the strength to be the supportive husband again?

"Why are you crying? Am I hurting you?"

I hear the concern in his voice and sense it in his touch. He lathers my hair with shampoo and softly massages my head. I close my eyes to avoid the sting of the soapy water, inhaling the aroma of peppermint, the tears rolling down my face, mixing with the suds and disappearing down the drain, where my naked toes are planted.

I'm annoyed that I need my husband to wash my hair. I'm tired of all the help. My reliance on others to perform simple tasks isn't supposed to happen until I'm an old woman at the end of my life, not in the middle of it. I feel

raw, overwhelmed with emotion. How can I explain this to him?

"I just feel useless...and I wonder what I'll look like after the bandage is off." The words come spilling out of me, but they leave me frustrated, not cleansed of my worry.

"Sweetie, I'm glad to help," he says gently. "Just let me love you. You'll grow stronger in time, I promise. Cut yourself some slack, you need time to let your body heal. You've just had major surgery. Be patient! And above all, please know that I think you're sexy with or without your boob. I love you inside and out."

I begin to sob, sensing a release. His tenderness and acceptance of the new me touches my heart.

I pick at the corner of the gauze, wondering if I'm ready to see what is beneath. I'm not sure when it's suppose to come off. Feeling disappointed, I realize there's another layer of protective bandaging underneath the first. The unveiling will have to wait.

"I just didn't think I'd be this dependent on everyone," I say. "Hell, I can't even wash my hair." I feel my muscles starting to relax as the warm water pours over my body, soothing me.

Jon continues to rub my shoulder. His naked body brushes up against my back.

"Well, I strongly encourage you never to shower alone again."

Jon leans down, a devilish twinkle in his hazel eyes, and kisses me. His lips are soft.

I stop crying and kiss him back.

About the author:

Kristen Knott embraced the written word to help in healing while completing her memoir, *[b]restless*. She is currently finishing a certificate in creative writing at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies while also seeking representation for *[b]restless* and writing a novel. You can see more of her writing on her blog, KristenKnott.com, and follow her on Twitter at [@KnottyKlK](https://twitter.com/KnottyKlK). "After being diagnosed with breast cancer at forty-two, I began to write, something I hadn't done in years. This helped me make sense of the wild ride that is cancer. Now, I can't fathom life without writing."

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