

MY WORD

UNITED WE STAND



When **Margarita Gokun Silver** was diagnosed with breast cancer, an extraordinary coincidence happened.

“UNDRESS FROM THE waist up,” the nurse said, “and put this on.” She pointed to the paper robe folded carefully on the exam table. “The doctor will be in shortly.”

My mother and I looked at each other. We were in the examining room of a plastic surgeon.

“She probably wasn’t told,” I mouthed to my mother and then said, louder, to the nurse: “We’ll need two robes. We both have appointments.”

Six months prior in the shower of an apartment in St Petersburg, Russia, I had soaped my hands to palpate my breasts. I’d been doing it for several years, spurred by the *early detection equals early cure* dogma of every pamphlet on breast cancer. My two great-aunts died of the disease and although, according to some physicians, they didn’t qualify as direct family history because they were my grandfather’s sisters, I didn’t want to take any risks.

My left breast seemed its usual self – lumpy, dense and not at all forthcoming with information on whether it harboured the deadly cells – but my right breast felt different. In the lower right quadrant, equidistant between the nipple and the ribs, there was a lump I had never detected before. With more soap and with my arm elevated, I went around the right breast again. And again. And again.

It was still there.

The previous month I’d miscarried for the third time in three years. In the shower that morning I thought that perhaps what I detected was the result. Still, I made an appointment at a fancy

St Petersburg clinic where expatriates got their care. There the doctor ordered a mammogram and after it came back clear, she agreed with me.

“Let’s give it time,” she said. “Come back in September if it’s still there.”

This was the end of May and all through our European summer travels my hand gravitated to the lower right quadrant of my right breast. The lump stuck around as we enjoyed sunshine on the Swedish coast, explored Copenhagen’s Tivoli Gardens, and tended to our punctured tyre in Tallinn, Estonia. When we returned, I made another appointment.

This time the doctor sent me to go get an ultrasound. The radiologist, an old man with experience that probably stretched back to the Brezhnev era, seemed suspicious.

“There is no clear mass, but I don’t like the look of it,” he said. “You need an MRI.”

Not fancy enough for its own MRI machine, the clinic sent me in an ambulance, taxi-service like, to a government-run hospital. There, after the procedure, I asked a chain-smoking doctor if she saw anything. “*Nyet*,” she answered. “But we have a few thousand images to review.” Her *nyet* gave me some hope.

Alas, she was wrong. The MRI detected a tumour. Later, a biopsy confirmed malignancy.

We lived in St Petersburg because of my husband’s job in the American Foreign Service. In less than 48 hours the State Department medevaced us for the treatment to Washington, DC, where

my parents lived. When we landed my mother told me she too had just received news of a lump in her breast.

In the following weeks we shared a breast surgeon, a plastic surgeon and a hospital room. Carriers of the BRCA gene, we both decided on double mastectomies. Our surgeries happened on consecutive days. Together we emptied incision-site drains and wondered what our breasts would look like following the reconstruction. Then it was off to chemo – chemo “light” for my mother who had already had it twice for ovarian cancer, and almost six months for me. “You are young,” my oncologist told me. “We’re more aggressive with young patients.”

Done after nine weeks, my mother assumed care of my six-year-old daughter while I battled chemo-induced nausea; later daily radiation therapy. When I couldn’t get out of bed, Mom took her to her ballet classes, drove her to play dates and helped with maths homework. She was there for me as a mother and a grandmother, but also as someone who knew and understood firsthand what I was going through.

Back in the plastic surgeon’s office the nurse stared at us, her eyes wide. “In my years of working here this has never happened,” she said.

We smiled at each other. “Stronger together,” we said.

» *Margarita Gokun Silver (@MGokunSilver) is a writer based in Athens, Greece. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian and The Atlantic.*