

I feel sick. I'm staring at a photo of the new me, the post-cancer-treatment me: face burnt and ravaged by radiation, distorted by surgery, bloated with chemo, sallow from the toxic chemicals that have been pumped into my now collapsed veins. I haven't looked at myself for months; I've passed mirrors and brushed my teeth while staring into the void. I didn't want to get my photo taken, but I needed a new passport. 'Just look at yourself, you gargoyle,' I say to myself, laughing out loud and quickly shoving the pack of square little photos deep into the pocket of my new uniform, a shapeless hooded parka. That feels good. See, I can laugh at the hideous me. But then suddenly I cry – great, big, embarrassing sobs – in Snappy Snaps in South Kensington, in front of a startled employee.

It's been four weeks since I ended my treatment (six cycles of chemo, 30 of high-dose radiation) for a rare eye cancer called squamous cell carcinoma. The most harrowing part – my treatment – is ostensibly over. Cancer has felt a lot like pregnancy: constant violent nausea and endless weight gain. With my clothes off, I look like a blubbery walrus. The shock of my post-treatment body jolts me to my senses. Is that really me? I have a lot to do to get myself back to me, or at least a semblance of me. Semantics, perhaps, but the thing that really bugs me is that my face is no longer symmetrical. My left eye, the offending cancerous one, the surgically altered one, points strangely downwards, as if my face has two separate halves glued together. I can have a corrective operation but right now the idea of more surgery turns my stomach. Somehow, I will have to learn to accept this new face of mine.

In the meantime, I make an inventory of what needs doing. I need to deal with my hair, or lack of it. I have no eyebrows or eyelashes, and although I still have most of the hair on my head (my chemo drug, Cisplatin, often used for cancers in the head area, does not make you lose your hair), I am now missing a large chunk from ear to ear at the back of my head, where the radiation beam swept over me daily. 'Think of it as an undercut,' my nurse tells me. It makes me feel like a teenage rebel, head half-shaved in protest, except I am 47 and mortified. My bald patch is as smooth as a baby's bottom; I stroke it abstractedly, like a soft pebble, while watching endless box sets I am not interested in. It doesn't bother me that much, but Elena Lavagni – the wife of Neville, of the eponymous Knightsbridge hair salon that I have been going to for years because it gives London's best blowdries – has a beautiful shiny hairpiece made for me, matched exactly to my hair colour. It clips on in seconds and I swing it while walking down the King's Road like a Sixties haircare ad.

My eyebrows, on the other hand, are more problematic. A little will grow back, but the area where my tumour was will remain hairless for life. Result: I now have one and a half eyebrows. I gather notes from friends about cosmetic tattoo artists in LA, New York and London, and I speak to make-up artists Pat McGrath, Charlotte Tilbury and Jemma Kidd, who all know someone brilliant, but the truth is that I hate eyebrow tattoos. I can't remember the amount of times I've stared at a friend with an eyebrow tattoo and thought: 'That looks crap.' So I abandon the idea completely and make an appointment to see Sue Marsh – London's eyebrow queen – in Motoomb Street. She greets

me like a kindly aunt and tells me all will be OK. First, she makes a stencil of my intact right eyebrow to help me draw the other one on until I decide what to do. We discuss Revitalash and Latisse (the latest in eyelash- and eyebrow-boosting creams), but I am not allowed to use either on my burnt skin. Irradiated hair does, apparently, eventually grow back for some, but the hair is usually white and sparse. Then she takes me upstairs to Cosmetics à la Carte, where a make-up artist saves my life and gives me the perfect ink – eyebrow pencil, eyeshadow and brushes. The final effect is good (unlike the one from a painted beauty lady in a department store who turned me into Groucho Marx). She teaches me how to draw feather strokes to emulate hairs, so as not to create one block of colour, and then to shade and shade and shade again with shadow. I am hopeless at first, all fingers and thumbs and comedy brows, but a few months down the line (it took that long) even my 10-year-old applauds my handiwork. 'So much better than the playground-slide eyebrows you were doing before, Mummy.' My facial hair is sorted. But I have bigger problems.

My skin is in shocking condition. During radiation, as my skin burnt to a bleeding, weeping crisp, I was only allowed (for fear of infection) to wash my face with Simple soap and moisturise it with aqueous cream (scent-, chemical- and soap-free). It's a world away from my regular state-of-the-art cosmeceutical cleansers, serums and hi-tech moisturisers. Halfway through, with skin like sandpaper,

I abandoned the Simple and turned, on the advice of an American friend, to Cetaphil, which is so good and so soothing that I still use it even though my skin is virtually back to normal. But what I really need are facials to reboot my skin, to hydrate it and refine it and drain it of its puffiness – to restore glow and health to my cheeks. In my quest, I stumble upon London's beauty heroes, the holy trinity of power facialists who, instead of proselytising about products and techniques, just get on with what they know works best: Sarah Chapman in Chelsea, Alexandra Soveral in Maida Vale and Véronique Simon in Knightsbridge. They perform very different treatments but what they all have in common is that they are at the top of their game, utterly professional, knowledgeable and the sort of women you

instinctively trust. If your appointment runs over, they don't mind – they sit and talk and nurture you. Thanks to them, my skin perks up. I look younger, prettier, more human.

But my life is about to get harder: I need to drop 20 pounds. While my chemo drug might have saved my life and my hair, it also made me violently ill. My oncologist counteracted the nausea with intravenous steroids on chemo days, followed by oral ones in between. Consequently, I blew up like the Hindenburg. My boobs bobbed like balloons under my chin and I became properly amusement-park, hamburger-snafflingly fat. I am a lifelong dieter but, post-treatment, the idea of food restriction and arduous exercise fills me with despair. While reading the Sunday supplements one day, I come across an article about a new combined treatment devised by personal trainer Christina Howells, who gives her clients (the editors of *Love* and *Grazia* magazines among them) pretty bodies, like Gwyneth Paltrow, with her shapely arms and legs. She works in combination with the therapist >

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◁ Daniela Rulinski, who performs an hour of Endermologie anti-cellulite massage (machine-activated suction rollers all over the body) immediately before Christina's rigorous, unimpeachably painful one-hour workout. When Christina says, 'Give me 30 more', it's usually after you've done 60 of her reps and you no longer think it's possible to do *one* more – but you do. She's devised a programme (which she operates out of the airy Mark Anthony gym based in a Notting Hill townhouse) specifically to elongate and lift, and for the first time in my life I really think I've found something that works, that doesn't bulk you up, that does what it says on the packet. Initially it's slow going and I want to throw up after each session, but Christina and Daniela are both so understanding, so patient and so practical, that I persevere. I start losing weight, but it's slow. It's not my fault, as it turns out – chemotherapy famously destroys the ovaries and I crash violently into sudden-onset menopause: my periods stop, hormonal pimples pop up along my jawline, yet more fat gathers along my middle and hot flushes strike me down every two minutes. I am cleared for traditional HRT but my instinct tells me to visit Dr Marion Gluck, a pioneer of bio-identical hormones – synthetic hormones with none of the recent controversy of real ones. Dr Gluck orders a full blood count and hormone profile and, as anticipated, the results reveal that I am, at least for now, in full menopause. (Chemo-induced menopause can, depending on one's age, be temporary, with the ovaries rebooting themselves and periods returning a few months down the line). I am prescribed a custom-made cream that, unlike traditional one-size-fits-all HRT, is tailored specifically to my hormonal levels. I rub it daily on the inside of my wrists and, after four weeks, my symptoms thankfully settle down.

While the majority of what I needed to do was cosmetic, there was, as is inevitably the case following cancer treatment, an emotional hangover: jittery nights and anxiety-filled days of wondering if the cancer would come back. Soothing my soul and my nerves became not just a luxury but a necessity. I was saved by the powerful ministrations of one of London's most closely guarded secrets: reflexologist Denise Wheeler, who visited me at home and left me in a state of unadulterated bliss. Cancer apart, I will continue using her for as long as I can afford her, so transformative and calming is the state she always leaves me in. My other great discovery is acupuncturist Annee de Mamiel, whom I visited one day in her beauty

room at Fortnum & Mason. As a cancer survivor herself, she understands exactly what her clients are going through and tailors each treatment individually, including one of the most relaxing facial massages I've ever had. My treatment over, I floated down to the food hall in the basement and absent-mindedly bought a packet of smoked salmon for £45.

The beauty professionals who looked after me during my recovery gave me appointments at the last minute, talked to me while I sobbed for no reason and shared with me the knowledge they'd each gleaned over the years of treating women in my situation. If I mention repeatedly how much they helped me, it is only to highlight the appalling treatment I received at a so-called fashionable west London spa. I had attempted to book some laser hair removal but when I told them I had cancer, I was treated like a leper. They informed me that they wouldn't treat me until I had a certificate stating that I was 'five years clear'. 'Five years?' I said. 'But I might be dead then.' I was informed it was against the law to treat me, which I already knew was utter rubbish. I had checked with the council and with the laser hair-removal company to see if there was any danger, which there wasn't. For some reason, I persisted and it was eventually agreed that if my oncologist would write a letter clearing me for treatment (which she did), they would book me in. When I arrived at the spa, I asked the receptionist I'd been dealing with if she'd received the letter. 'Yes,' she said, 'we have, but [sending the letter] was stupid of her.' I cried for an hour and will never go back there again.

My post-cancer beauty overhaul was meant to be a quick fix, like a car going in for a service, but I've met so many brilliant practitioners, so many dedicated professionals, that I have vowed to continue using them because their treatment was often more than skin-deep and, while I was recovering, they were an important part of my overall return to health and happiness. When my husband and I travelled to the MD Anderson Cancer Centre in Houston to get a second opinion, the professor who looked after me said at our last meeting: 'This is who you are now, someone who has had cancer and who could get it again. Live your life well knowing that, cut out stress and look after yourself.' Those were simple words but powerful ones. As I look at another photo of myself, taken this time after my beauty overhaul, I know that while I may never look like my old self again, it's not so bad. I can now live with the new me, the one with the wonky, asymmetrical face. □

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Address book

Specialised clip-on hair service From £350, at Neville Hair & Beauty, 5 Pont Street, SW1 (nevillehairandbeauty.net or 020 7235 3654).

Eyebrow treatment From £25, with Sue Marsh, at Cosmetics à la Carte, 19b Motcomb Street, SW1 (cosmeticsalacarte.com or 020 7235 0596).

Bespoke facial From £130, with Sarah Chapman, at Skinesis Clinic, 106 Draycott Avenue,

SW3 (sarahchapman.net or 020 7589 9585).

Signature Face Treatment From £140 for 60 minutes, with Alexandra Soveral, at Alexandra Soveral Organic Aromatherapy, 97d Elgin Avenue, W9 (alexandrasoveral.co.uk or 020 7266 3577).

The Rejuvenator From £265 for 60 minutes, with Véronique Simon, at 9a West Halkin Street, SW1 (docteurveroniquesimon.com or 020 7235 0679).

Personal training From £72.50 for 60 minutes, with Christina Howells.

Endermologie From £60 for 60 minutes, with Daniela Rulinski; a course of 12 sessions at £650 is recommended. Both at Mark Anthony's Wellness, 57 Ossington Street, W2 (bodybychristina.com and rulinski.com).

Hormone therapy From £240 for a 45-minute consultation with Dr Marion Gluck, at the Marion

Gluck Clinic, 61 Wimpole Street, W1 (mariongluckclinic.com or 020 7402 2151).

At-home reflexology From £95 for 60 minutes, with Denise Wheeler (07887 645098).

Seasonal Attunement acupuncture From £195 for 90 minutes, with Annee de Mamiel, at Beauty à la Carte, Fortnum & Mason, 181 Piccadilly, W1 (demamiel.com or 07516 099010).