

**My Mamma Mia**  
by G. Evelyn Lampart

“You will need a mastectomy,” the barely middle-aged breast surgeon with strawberry blonde hair, Dr. G., is saying. She looks too charming and nice to perform such a violent action. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail, her cheeks are round and joyful, her toenails are each painted a different color, and she wears strappy sandals that showcase her healthy legs. How incongruous for her to use the dreaded word: *Mastectomy*. Unfathomable. I am shriveling. Shrinking. She couldn’t mean me. I didn’t do anything wrong.

I feel attacked and threatened. How can I live without my breast? This is worse than when I was told I had cancer. Cancer is a word, a noun; mastectomy involves an action. Cancer was an abstraction. I knew that cancer could happen to anyone and yes, even to me. Or, why not me? I was in my therapist Naomi’s office and being brave when I voiced that thought. The news that I had cancer was numbing and took time to swallow. However, now I am in the hands of Dr. G. and she believes that I will need a mastectomy. She mistakes my beaded necklace with the musical notes *quavers* as a charm, for a *Chai*, as she examines my naked breasts. She is friendly. And I have no lumps. I am encouraged. Then why a mastectomy? Dr. G. explains with medical terminology, I do not comprehend. If only I had worn the gold necklace I obsess, the one with a real *Chai*, this would not be happening. Dr. G. is branding me with the word *mastectomy* and it is chewing up my insides. I am diminished with fright. I remain standing in Dr. G’s office, afraid to sit down. I would like to pretend that I did not hear her say it. The word. Mastectomy. And mean me. She plans to amputate my breast and leave me flat like a pancake. Dr. G. has to be wrong.

I am a healthy woman. Dr. G. doesn’t know me. I have undergone mammograms every year for the past two decades, plus one for this year, since I turned forty. Just as prescribed. There was nothing ever even slightly alarming before. Just the letter in the mail saying that I am in good shape. I had come to expect that letter. And now Dr. G. is telling me that I will need a mastectomy? That is so extreme - so radical - and final. How can I go from “A to Z” in just one morning?

Dr. G. is pleasant. Not too hot and not too cold. She is matter of fact about my diagnosis. She is calm. Mellow. Focused. We could be talking about hairstyles, hers long, mine short. So maybe I am mistaken. Or maybe she is. After all the broccoli I’ve eaten how can this be my verdict? I consume more green leafy vegetables than most of my friends and they are all cancer free. My favorite dish, after all, is spinach pie. I also enjoy tofu, tempeh, grains and nuts, and multi-colored fruits. I choose egg whites over eggs with yolks and have for many years. I restrict my cheese intake and I drink almond milk. I do my own cooking. What went wrong?

Dr. G. recommends that I schedule the surgery. I am going to get

another opinion.

\*\*\*\*\*

Actually Dr. G. was my second opinion. I cannot say though that the first doctor I consulted gave me an opinion. After examining me Dr. T. reached for a pointer, and with a flourish indicated a spot on the film image of my breast on a monitor.

“It’s just a piece of meat,” he instructed me and smiled generously to convince me that he was right. He had a wide smile and large teeth. The better to convince me that it was okay to cut off a chunk of my breast? Was I Little Red Hiding Hood? Was he the Big Bad Wolf?

Dr. T. made his intention clear and outlined his plan to perform a lumpectomy. He did not recommend having a biopsy done first.

“They don’t always get the right spot. So even if they say you don’t have cancer they could be wrong. They work in the dark.”

Was he joking?

“What if the doctor is a pool shark?” I wanted to know, imagining my breast spread out on a pool table. Dr. T. chuckled. He thought I was joking. I wasn’t. And he wasn’t either. Puzzled about the business of biopsies and lumpectomies I wondered out loud, “maybe I should go to Sloan Kettering.”

“They bury people there too,” was Dr. T.’s all too swift reply. I didn’t know being buried was an option; just because I had an abnormal mammogram for the first time in my life. I did not contest his opinion but I did contact the American Medical Association about the “butcher surgeon” as soon as possible. I also alerted the gynecologist who referred me to Dr. T. I complained to her about the awful thing Dr. T. had said.

“What did you expect him to say?” Dr. L., the gynecologist I had been going to for over fifteen years, admonished me. “Why bring up Sloan?”

Why indeed? I wanted more opinions on one hand and on the other hand I was procrastinating. How to choose? I didn’t know, and so I made an appointment for a third opinion. This surgeon was cold and humorless; she struck me as a surgeon’s surgeon. She told me not to bother asking her any questions at all until she did further tests. She was adamant. “I am not going to answer you.”

I could not think of one question I would ask her after she took her stance. She had already answered the most important one for me. No, I would not allow her to ever touch me again.

She, Dr. Blank (I don’t remember her initials), said she would not even consider a lumpectomy based on the films she had of my breast. She would have to do a full mastectomy. Period. Dr. Blank spoke as if we were not talking about breasts. My breasts! She was brusque, officious, corporate. The room in which she gave me her verdict was the same room in which she had examined me. It was cold and sterile except for glossy magazines about cancer. I paid the exorbitant price of five hundred dollars for her consultation and stoically waited for my credit card to be approved. I was relieved not to have to make any more appointments with Dr. Blank.

So, I returned to Dr. G. Her office, strewn with loosely crocheted

afghans draped over the backs of several easy chairs, now felt like a comfort zone. I felt that Dr. G. might have understood what I was going through. To create a homey atmosphere she had on display several multi-colored abstract sculptures of breasts in various sizes and shapes. No woman is the same I intuited from her choice of artwork. Her medical diploma from Rmat Aviv in Israel also held my interest. My mother's sister lived in Rmat Aviv, as did Golda Meir. I felt a connection. She was a real person.

I still had not agreed to the mastectomy. I wasn't ready to give in and schedule the operation. Dr. G. did not push me. As I was leaving I noticed a large handmade wall hanging behind the door with dozens of buttons sewed on all over the work of art. It reminded me of a wall hanging I had made in my mid-twenties, over thirty years ago.

I had almost forgotten about it. I loved buttons and I collected them. In my wall hanging I was a woman falling over the edge of the earth, a large circle that I painted on the duck cloth with acrylics. And with great effort I sewed on the buttons that were a significant symbol of women's work and saving grace. I gave up in frustration though, because sewing on the buttons was almost impossible. In Dr. G.'s office I understood that buttons looked like breasts and nipples. I told her that I liked the wall hanging. She assured me that after surgery I could make one too. That was not what I wanted to hear. I was sure my button making days were well behind me and I went home disillusioned.

I returned to Dr. G.'s office for the third time with my psychologist, Naomi. I could not make up my mind about a doctor. I was about to get a fourth opinion, but Naomi suggested I see Dr. G. again and offered to go with me. Naomi was familiar with my demons.

Dr. G. was impressed that my therapist was with me on a rainy Tuesday morning. And I was moved that Naomi met me outside her office. That helped me accept that my situation was serious and required treatment. I felt nurtured and worthy of making the right decision because we were together; making right so many things that had gone wrong before in my life as a woman. Together we beseeched Dr. G. to perform a lumpectomy first. She agreed. Dr. G. performed the lumpectomy on my breast a week later. My breast looked good to me, but I was not clear of carcinoma.

Dr. G. tells me again, and there is no way around it: I will need a mastectomy. What I really need though are new spring clothes, to rejoin my health club, practice yoga regularly, finish reading *Middlemarch* and all the books piled around my night table, clean my apartment, go through my closets, find a new job, get back to my old job, learn French and how to play the flute, groom my cats, write my memoir, hem a pair of pants, mend some socks, repot my cactus, tell my friends I love them, make some new friends, clear the air with an ex-friend, *and* when I visit my 92 year old father, do his laundry, clean his refrigerator and his toilet bowl, throw out his garbage, and... most importantly: Outlive Him! There are so many things I need to do. What I do not need is a mastectomy.

Mastectomy is a word so ugly and devastating that I am afraid to

repeat it to my friends for fear it may be contagious. I hear the word and it chews me up. I do not want anything to do with this mastectomy. It is an “other” word. It has to do with other women. Not me. At the age of 61, I thought I was safe from breast cancer. My mother didn’t have cancer. And neither did her mother. That should have been good enough. I am healthy, my blood pressure is consistently good, as are my heart and lungs, I do not have diabetes, and I do have lots of good cholesterol.

A mastectomy will mutilate me forever. I will be flat as a kitchen plate. I will never be the same. I cannot live through the horror of the **M** word. I cannot think this word easily to myself. I don’t want to use the word that sounds like masochism, like master, like masturbation, like miserable, like must. Like meat! Naomi suggests that I can change the word. I like the idea. The word mastectomy is derived from Greek origins. Ectome - cutting and Mastos - woman’s breast. And even the word Amazons, who are known to be strong warriors, comes from “**a-mazo**,” meaning “without breast.” The Amazons were said to have cut off their right breasts to use a bow and throw a spear more freely. There is no evidence of this though. I want to be an Amazon then. I would rather have my breast even if people think I do not.

And instead of a mastectomy I want a **mamma mia**. A word that with one operatic cry can herald all mammals with mammary glands: all women. To separate a woman from her breast requires a word that expresses both the need for nurture and the act of strength required. I long for my mother who is dead. I want to be hugged by her and feel her healthy buxom breasts against my own bosom to gather strength. My mother would hold my hand and not let go. I long for the mother in all of nature - in all of life. I want to live.

In the operating room as I laid down on the table and the anesthesia was injected via an IV into my arm, I was aware of all the women who have gone through various forms of this surgery throughout history. The terror of mastectomy is primal, and I needed to give the process a name that I could own. All the women I told that I would need a *mamma mia* immediately understood what I meant. That was powerful. And with that spirit my eyes closed as the doctors and nurses worked together to separate me from cancer - not from myself as a woman.

December 10, 2011

Author Bio: Evelyn Lampart is a licensed clinical social worker, as well as a writer and painter. Her latest endeavor was to join a group reading works of literature in Yiddish, her mother tongue.

Email: [Evelyn Lampart](mailto:Evelyn Lampart)