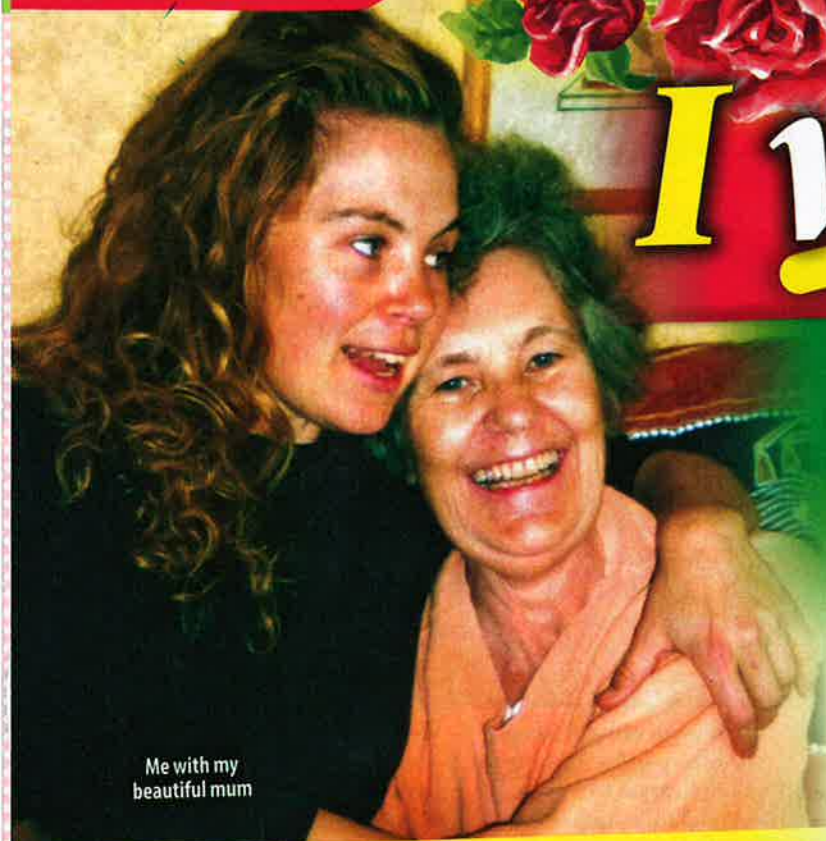


I won't be like you, Mum



Me with my beautiful mum

I'd already been through so much when the fight started all over again

Joseph Dietrich, 44, Brisbane, Qld.

everything to be with her. It was stressful, but Mum always pulled through. Sick of psychology, I completed a certificate to teach English and started dating one of my classmates, Brett.

We soon fell in love. We'd both dreamed of moving to France so, once our course was finished, we packed up and got teaching jobs over there.

Three months in, Mum called. "It's back," she blurted. "They've found it in my liver." Blood pounded in my ears as I took in her words. It had spread. "She'll be okay,"

tightly before she was wheeled into the operating theatre. I was an emotional wreck as I paced the hallways. I couldn't consider that something might go wrong. Mum was my best friend and she had to be okay.

Thankfully, the surgery was a success. "We can start radiotherapy," the specialist explained. "But it might harden your tissue which could cause problems if the cancer returns." Mum shook her head. "You removed all of the cancer," she said. "I won't need radiotherapy."

I worried about Mum going against the doctor's advice. It was a huge decision, but she always knew what was best. Once she was back on her feet, I returned to Melbourne. As the years passed, the cancer returned. Mum had another lumpectomy and then a mastectomy.

Each time I dropped

I told myself. *She's always okay.*

I called her every day, desperate for good news. But a few weeks later, she was crying down the phone. "They said I have three months to live," she told me. My legs buckled. I needed to get home.

Brett and I quit our jobs and moved to Byron Bay.

AS TOLD TO BRITANNY SMITH

wrapped the landline cord around my finger as I listened to my mum's anxious voice.

"I went to the doctors," she said with a sigh. "Love, I have breast cancer."

I sank to the hallway floor in disbelief. Mum had been a single parent my whole life and I was her only child. It was always us against the world. How could I get by without her?

I'd left our home in Canberra four years earlier, and moved to Melbourne to study psychology at uni, while Mum had moved to Byron Bay, NSW. At 21, I'd have to put uni on hold.

The next day I arrived home and took Mum to the oncologist.

"It hasn't spread yet," he reassured, explaining she'd need a lumpectomy to remove the cancer.

Days later, I hugged Mum

"I sank to the hallway floor in disbelief"



Me during chemo

Mum looked so fragile and thin.

"I'm here," I soothed. I took Mum home and cared for her full-time.

She was weak, and constantly tired, but we still enjoyed chatting over a cuppa every morning. She'd always loved the ocean so I took her to the nearby lighthouse to watch the waves.

One year after I started caring for her, Mum took a sudden turn for the worse.

I squeezed her hand as I sat beside her hospital bed. "You're being so strong," she said as tears pricked my eyes.

Hours later, a doctor visited. "Your mum's in too much pain," he warned. "We need to put her in an induced coma."

With so many painkillers in her system, she was barely conscious when she was put under. I stayed with her over the next three days, and Brett held my hand as I watched Mum take her last breath.

Stunned, I left the room. It

felt like I was in my own little bubble and the outside world was simply white noise.

Over time, I got used to not having Mum around, although the pain of her death never went away.

Three years later I fell pregnant. Finally, it felt like the light in the darkness. But when our son, Felix, was born our worries only continued. He wouldn't eat and doctors had to place a peg in his stomach, for me to feed him through.

"We don't know what condition Felix has," a specialist explained. "But he'll be a high-needs kid."

Brett held me as I stroked Felix's forehead, scared about the battles we still had to fight.

Nine months after his birth, I was at my annual ultrasound breast check when the doctor frowned.

"Have you felt this?" she asked, pointing to a mass on the scan.

I hadn't noticed any changes but as soon as I felt my right breast my stomach flipped. "I can feel a lump," I stammered.

A biopsy confirmed my biggest fear.

"You have an aggressive form of breast cancer," my doctor said. "It's already in your lymph nodes, but we caught it early."

Brett rushed from work to be with me. Stunned, I sat in Felix's bedroom while he napped, my heart hammering.

I thought about how

much care he'd need. *What if I'm not around to look after him?*

My mum had fought so hard for a decade and she'd still been taken from me. I couldn't leave Felix.

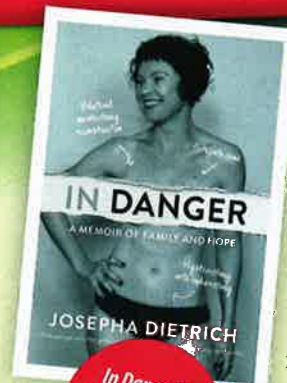
At my next appointment I told my doctor I wanted a full mastectomy.

"That's not necessary," she argued.

I shook my head adamantly. "I watched my mother die," I choked. "I need to do what I can to survive for my son."

Reluctantly, she agreed. Surgeons started with a lumpectomy then, after three months of chemo, performed a double mastectomy and a full reconstruction.

My cancer was receptive to



In Danger by Joseph Dietrich is on sale for \$29.95 RRP.

hormones and that meant that while I still had my female organs there was a risk the cancer would return.

I wanted to remove everything but that would mean not having another child.

"I'll support you, no matter what you choose," Brett promised.

We'd always wanted two

kids, but I had to trust my gut. I had a full hysterectomy to remove my ovaries, fallopian tubes, cervix, uterus and womb.

Recovering from surgery was hard but, worst of all, Felix was sick so he wasn't allowed to visit me in hospital. It was so strange, being without him.

The surgery was drastic but I've been cancer-free for nine years now.

Felix has been diagnosed with non-verbal autism. He has a communication device that speaks for him and he's started at a mainstream school.

I've also published a book, *In Danger*, about Mum's battle with cancer and my own journey.

When I was receiving treatment I was desperate to read an honest account of this terrible disease so I wrote the book I wished I'd had.

I'm glad I can help women feel less alone.

Mum was taken far too young, but I thank my lucky stars I was able to fight back.



I wanted to give other women an honest account

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