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To Jane Steele, breast cancer was always something that happened to older women. But at age 31, the girlfriend of Australian cricketer Glenn McGrath realised how wrong statistics can be. By Julie Nance

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, with a towel wrapped around her waist, Jane's eyes were continually drawn to her left breast. As the 31 year old ran a comb through her wet hair, she had an uneasy feeling. Instead of the bottom of her breast being curved, it appeared to flatten out. Jane carefully felt the breast as she stood on the cold bathroom tiles in the English hotel room. There was no sign of a lump, but Glenn suggested she visit a doctor for reassurance. Jane did not. Instead she sat nervously for the following two weeks and

watched her fast-bowler boyfriend help Australia win the 1997 Ashes series.

"Mum had breast cancer six years ago at the age of 49, but I never thought for a second it could happen to me, especially this young," says Jane, a former flight attendant. "But deep down the alarm bells were going off. I knew it was serious."

On the couple's return to Sydney, a nurse friend examined Jane's breast and to both women's horror, discovered a lump. The next day a GP confirmed not one lump in the breast but two, helping to ease Jane's distress by telling her it would be "extremely rare" for them to be malignant because of her age.

Jane's relief was short lived. A couple of days later, with Glenn holding her hand, her eyes were fixed on the GP's face as he opened an envelope containing the results of an ultrasound and mammograms she had undergone. He examined them, and said: "These lumps

need further investigation in the form of a needle biopsy. This is not looking good."

Glenn and Jane made it to the car park, both of them in tears. "I have cancer, haven't I?" Jane cried. Glenn looked at his girlfriend and then held her tight. He didn't have to say anything.

"I was thinking, this can't be happening," says Jane, who had never regularly checked her breasts. "Life before this could not have been better - we were so happy. We had just travelled back to England for three months where I caught up with family and friends, and Glenn was made 'player of the series', on the Ashes tour. It was a really exciting time."

English-born Jane met Glenn, from western NSW, in a Hong Kong nightclub three years ago while she was on a stopover with her airline, and he was representing Australia in a six-a-side competition. They swapped contact details and maintained a long-distance relationship for months before Jane came to live with Glenn in July 1996. Just over a year later, Jane was lying on a pathologist's table with a needle passing into her breast to extract tissue for a biopsy.

"The test confirms you have cancer," the surgeon told her a couple of days later. "The

lumps are malignant and the only option for you is to have a mastectomy. This will be followed by radiotherapy and chemotherapy which could make you infertile. So you may not be able to have children."

Jane and Glenn's world and their plans for the future fell apart. "Is that the only option?" Glenn asked. The surgeon turned to Jane, and replied: "It's your breast, or your life."

Jane was hysterical. She asked if she could have a breast reconstruction, but the surgeon gave no guarantees, saying it depended upon the success of the operation and the radiotherapy treatment. Jane declared there was no way she could agree to the operation and, before they left, Glenn said they wanted a second opinion.

The pressure was on from all quarters for Jane to have the operation, not least from her distraught parents on the phone from England. But she was adamant she would not, and at her darkest moment told Glenn: "I'd rather die than lose my breast."

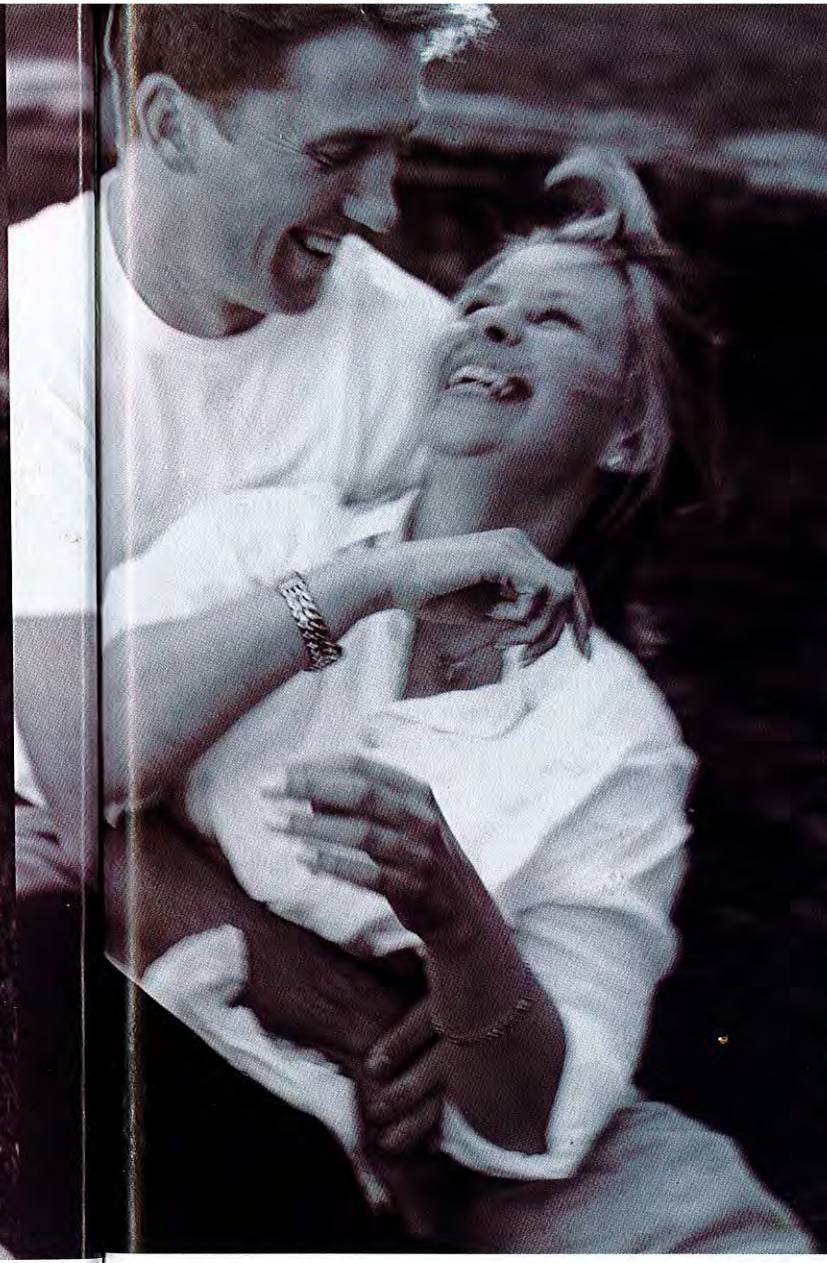
Jane explains: "I was scared of losing Glenn - I thought it would make me unattractive. Breasts are a major part of being a woman - they are the really sensual area of your body." At the back of Jane's mind was the fact that

her mother's boyfriend of 14 years had left her straight after a mastectomy.

Glenn encouraged Jane to have the operation, adamant nothing would change between them and he would love her "no matter what". But Jane, who was used to women blatantly throwing themselves at the cricketers - even with their partners standing beside them - feared he would reject her. "It was very shallow looking back now, and it did Glenn a real disservice, but that was the way I felt," says Jane. "I knew there were women only too willing to take my place."

The second medical opinion simply confirmed the first. It was the last straw for Jane. She had to get out of Sydney - and its grim realities - immediately. The couple set off on a 10-hour drive to their remote property, 170km north-west of Bourke. It was there that Jane cleared her head and made a decision that saved her life.

Australian cricket captain Mark Taylor phoned the couple with the name of an oncologist. Glenn called him straightaway, and was told: "You should not mess around with cancer - tell Jane to have the operation. If a reconstruction is all it will take for her to have it - we will find a way for her to have a >



Jane Steele and Glenn McGrath - happy the ordeal is over and thrilled because they can still have children.

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> reconstruction." Jane finally had something positive to hang on to. "I was thrilled," she says. "It really uplifted me. To me, a reconstruction meant I could look normal. I thought, why give the cancer a chance to win?"

Within two days she was in a private hospital in Sydney, being wheeled towards theatre. At the doors, Glenn kissed his girlfriend goodbye, and said: "I love you." Once inside, Jane was crying uncontrollably, before succumbing to the anaesthetic.

Glenn sat by Jane's bedside as she spent the day heavily sedated and surrounded by flowers from well-wishers. The operation was a success, with the surgeon leaving enough skin for a reconstruction.

"When I finally came to, I was just glad it was all over," says Jane, who was heavily bandaged. "On the fifth day, the doctor wanted me to see the scar before I left hospital – and for Glenn to see it, too. Before the operation, I had told Glenn he would never see my scar."

She finally agreed and the bandages were removed. "I had to take several deep breaths before I could look down," Jane says. "But it wasn't as bad as I'd imagined – he did a neat job. There was just a flat area with no nipple

"It wasn't as bad as I'd imagined – he did a neat job. There was just a flat area with no nipple where the breast used to be."

Three steps to breast self-examination

In the shower

(Best for women with small breasts) Raise your left arm. With the flat part of the fingers of your right hand, carefully examine your left breast. In a circular pattern, start from the outer top, pressing firmly enough to feel the tissue beneath without digging into the skin. After a full circle, move inwards 2cm and circle again, continuing until you reach the nipple. Check the area above the breast and up into your armpit. Then using your left hand, repeat on the right breast and up into your armpit.

Lying down

(Best for women with larger breasts) With a pillow under your shoulder, raise your left hand above your head. Examine your entire breast in the circular motion described in step 1. Remember to check above your breast and up into your armpit. Repeat on your right breast.

In front of the mirror

(For everyone) Place your hands at your sides and check for any changes in colour, size or shape, or dimpling or scaling of the skin. Look for changes in the

nipple. Check again, first placing hands on hips and pressing your shoulders and elbows forward to flex your chest muscles, then clasping your hands behind your head.

"If you notice any changes, arrange to see your doctor immediately. In nine out of 10 cases, a breast lump is benign (not malignant). When breast cancer is found and treated early, the chance for full recovery is high.

Self-examination information provided by the National Breast Cancer Centre.

where the breast used to be. There were staples right across my chest for about 15cm and extending under my arm. It didn't seem to bother Glenn at all. I wasn't happy with him seeing it, but I knew it was best."

Jane arrived home determined life would not alter while she recovered. Accompanied by her mum, who was visiting from the UK, she went to Grace Bros lingerie department to be fitted with a prosthetic breast. "I remember getting back home and putting on this tight lycra top, and I was just thrilled to bits," says Jane, who was angry no-one told her about the availability of prostheses while in hospital. "I felt like I could just be myself."

Six weeks after her operation, Jane was strong enough to begin her next challenge – chemotherapy. She was grateful the cocktail of drugs did not make her hair fall out, but the treatment was gruelling, leaving her constantly nauseous, tired and weak for six long months, interrupted only by a five-week course of radiotherapy.

By the end of April, it was all over and she rapidly began to feel better. Tests showed the treatment was successful and the surgeon did not want to see her for another six months. She had not stopped menstruating throughout her treatment, so Jane and Glenn's plans for a family could become a reality.

"I've recently started working out again at home and I've never felt better," says Jane, relaxing in the new waterfront home she shares with Glenn. "I'm so grateful to wake up in the morning and feel healthy and well. I'm a better person for the experience, and it has brought Glenn and me closer together. I couldn't ask for more in a partner – he was there for me every step of the way."

She says losing a breast has not altered her body image or self-confidence and she still prefers to wear tight tops. "At first I thought I wouldn't feel as sensual or as sexy," the 32 year old says. "Sex is great but, for me, it is not quite the same. Sometimes I am a little bit self-conscious and wish things were different. I wear a camisole top – not for Glenn – it's just the way I feel."

But Jane's initial fear of Glenn leaving her was not shared by the fast bowler. "To be honest, that thought never crossed my mind," he says. "I love Jane for the person she is, not because of any particular part of her body. This has made us closer and our relationship a lot stronger. I look at Jane differently now. I know the strength she has and admire her a lot more."

She has decided to talk publicly about her ordeal to help raise breast-cancer awareness and "give something back". "If one woman does something about a breast lump or abnormality, it has been worth it," says Jane, who urges women to check their breasts monthly. "Cancer is such a scary word. I want women to know it doesn't have to be the end of the world – it's just the beginning." □



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