



DAWN O'PORTER

I couldn't imagine my future after Mum died

TV presenter and novelist Dawn O'Porter was just a child when her mother Carol died of breast cancer at just 36. And only now is she ready to face the past and feel confident about the future. Here Dawn, 34, who lives in London with her husband, actor Chris O'Dowd, 33, opens up about her experiences and fears...

“ Until five years ago, I denied I was affected by my mum dying of breast cancer when I was just seven.

But there was always this sense I was running out of time. I didn't think, 'Oh God, I'm going to die', but I always felt I had to fit stuff in, so life was very fast paced in my 20s. I had blinkers on. I think it was a consequence of my mum dying because from an early age I realised I wasn't going to live for ever.

I remember people at school or university saying, 'When I'm old...' or 'When I'm married...' always projecting into the future. But I never presumed I would have a future, so I always lived in the present.

It's very real to me now I'm approaching the age my mum got ill. I'm 35 in January and she was 36 when she died. When you're a girl, 36 seems old but I still feel young.

Mum had been diagnosed a few years earlier and had had a mastectomy. But in 1985, the cancer returned and spread to her lymph glands and then to her cervix. She died two days before my seventh

birthday. I've calmed down a lot now, especially after turning 30, when I became more comfortable with who I am. Getting married in August last year was also significant as you can't ignore your future

when there's somebody else in your life.

There's a point when you need to look to the future and when I turned 30 I started to think about where I wanted to be in 10 years time. Pensions still baffle me, though. Why would you save money for 40 years' time? I don't see the point.

I check my breasts as often as I can. Awareness is the biggest thing and if you

catch breast cancer early you've got a very good chance of beating it. Most breast cancer is found by self-examination, and it's so important.

I've had the genetic test for the BRCA1 and BRCA2 cancer gene and it came out negative, so that was a huge relief. But two women in my family died from breast cancer when they were under 40 and I've never presumed I wouldn't get it. I'm emotionally prepared for it as I've never not thought it would happen to me. I'm not living in fear of it though – my gran lived to 86 and never had it. But when it's your own mother you feel like it's in you.

If I'd known she was going to die, I'd have built more memories. One of the hardest parts was getting to a point when I couldn't remember her. That was when the sadness began about five years ago. And that's what drives me mad – that there's a massive hole in my life. I don't

know what it feels like to have a mum, I can't picture her face. I coasted through life elbowing people out of the way saying, 'I'm fine, I'm fine' and then when I reached 30 it hit me.

I found writing my first book, *Paper Aeroplanes*, so cathartic as I created a character who experiences a similar thing to me. It helped me realise what I'd gone through and there were quite a few tears. I just thought, 'Two little girls losing their mum is the saddest thing. It's the worst

thing that could happen.'

I met a woman a couple of years ago who was dying from breast cancer and she had a seven-year-old daughter. We bonded because I could ask her what it was like from my mum's perspective, and she could ask me what it was going to be like from her daughter's perspective. She had a memory box for her daughter, which I thought was incredible. She was writing

notes to put in it, and special birthday cards. It was so lovely.

I've just edited a book called *The Booby Trap and Other Bits and Boobs*, to help raise awareness and money for breast cancer. It contains all kinds of booby-related stories from celebs and bestselling authors. A few of them made me cry but there was lots of laughter too.

I love singer Sophie Ellis-Bextor's story about her gran, and comic Sarah Millican's 20 Things I Love About My Boobs is so funny. She says they can hold her pencils and help her learn the alphabet up to H. She also says, in a good bra, they make her feel like a 1950s Hollywood starlet.

Davina McCall's story made me weep. She talks about a woman who saved her from drowning when she was a little girl, whom she never saw again. She vividly remembers this woman's enormous, comforting boobs when she cuddled her. I thought it was the loveliest story.

My favourite story is by Maude Apatow, daughter of film producer Judd Apatow. It's brilliantly written and she talks about hating her breasts as a teenager and being confused about why she had them. There's one moment when she is hurting herself by lying face down on a cold marble floor, trying to make them disappear. It's a great snapshot of the teenage female brain.

When someone close to you dies from



breast cancer – like my mother did – no one knows how to cope with it.

Some women have told me they've lost friends after getting the diagnosis, because people have avoided them, not knowing what to say or how to approach the person who is not well. I think the best thing is to be normal, and to make as many memories as possible.



AS TOLD TO LISA POLLEN

■ To order *The Booby Trap and Other Bits and Boobs* at the price of £7.99 with free P&P, please call the Mirror Bookshop on 0871 803 6772. For every copy sold, £1 will be split between three charities: CoppaFeel!, Breast Cancer Care and Breakthrough Breast Cancer.



HAPPY With husband Chris O'Dowd

 Female breast cancer rates have increased by almost 70% since the mid-1970s and by 2010 more than 49,500 women were diagnosed with breast cancer, that's around 136 women a day.
 Cancer Research UK

 Four in five cancer patients are hit with an average cost of £570 a month in treatment-related expenses. These include fuel for travelling to hospital appointments, car parking fees and prescription drugs.
 Macmillan Cancer Support

 Women under 30 are more likely to have their eyes checked by an optician than regularly check their own breasts for breast cancer.
 CoppaFeel!

 Around 400 men in the UK were diagnosed with breast cancer in 2010.
 Cancer Research UK

 Having children at a younger age and breast-feeding both lower the risk of breast cancer.
 Cancer Research UK



CHILDHOOD A young Dawn with her mum

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