



INNER STYLE

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE...

...to be awake during an operation

ALEXANDRA DRUMMOND TELLS **VICTORIA LAMBERT** HOW SURGERY TO SAVE HER LIFE MEANT SHE HAD TO CHAT THROUGH THE SIX-HOUR PROCEDURE

The surgeon held my hand, looked into my eyes and said: "I don't want to frighten you, but you're going to be awake in this operation." My husband, Justin, looked shocked, but I thought it was a joke. I was certainly confused.

Four days earlier, I had been diagnosed with a brain tumour in the left frontal lobe area and placed on a cocktail of steroids, painkillers and antiseizure medication, which had left me woozy. But even to my sleepy brain, the idea was incongruous. Yet the doctor continued: "While I'm taking the tumour out, you will have to be speaking so I know I am not removing any brain cells that affect speech. If you stop speaking suddenly, I'll stop cutting." It was overwhelming. He explained that the tumour was not some simple free-floating mass that could be easily removed, as I had imagined. Instead, it was a collection of malignant cancerous cells that were enmeshed in healthy ones. It would have to be snipped out very carefully.

My world had been turned upside down. Only a week before, I had been healthy and carefree. Aged 33, I was working in wealth management, spending my free time socialising and travelling. This particular weekend in late May, 2007, Justin, also 33, and I were taking a break in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, in the South of France, after attending a wedding in Portofino, Italy. We were staying with my brother-in-law Jason, and his fiancée, Helen, at their villa.

I'd spent most of the Tuesday at our private pool, swimming and sunbathing. That evening, Justin was having a snooze before we went out and, having showered, I lay down next to him. Suddenly I had an epileptic fit. There had been no warning symptoms, no blurred vision or headaches; I just flung my body off the bed onto the marble floor, hitting my head on an ironwork table and giving myself a black eye. I was convulsing so hard, I kept biting my tongue, until it swelled to three times its normal size. Justin tried to restrain me. He counted five consecutive episodes – known as grand mal seizures – that I went through. Jason called a doctor. I vaguely recall him standing there in Gucci loafers and a satin shirt pronouncing: "She's hysterical." Then I began fitting again, and he changed his diagnosis and called an ambulance to take me to Nice.

After a CT scan, Justin was told I had a tumour. It was a huge shock, but I was physically too drained to take it in. Justin decided to get me home; friends had recommended the neurosurgeon Kevin O'Neill, based at the Cromwell hospital, in west London. Luckily I had private health insurance. My husband chartered a private plane and we flew home on the Sunday.

That evening, O'Neill came to see me, warning that the procedure had to be performed with me partially awake. Warm and friendly, he said he hoped we'd get a good result. He also told me he would only shave off a fraction of my long hair, and the incision

would be quite small, so that, afterwards, nobody would know.

So far, the experience had been more shocking for Justin than it was for me. Three years earlier, in 2004, my father, David, was diagnosed with a rare type of cancer at the age of 62; he died nine weeks after diagnosis. At the time I was devastated, yet now his death gave me an inner strength. I was given a further boost when the hospital announced it had ordered a high-tech scanner from Norway, called a Sonowand, which can distinguish between healthy and malignant tissue (whereas the naked eye cannot). I was the first person in Britain to be operated on with one.

My surgery was timed for the first Friday in June. Justin and my mother, Elaine, came to preop with me and said goodbye. When they left, I felt frightened, and when O'Neill said: "I'll be speaking to you soon!" – he meant during the operation – it finally hit me what was about to happen and I burst into tears. Funnily enough, I think the medics were relieved by my show of emotion. My previous joy control had been deemed unnatural.

I was put under a general anaesthetic so the team could open up my skull, then I was brought partly round. Rather than lying down, I found myself propped up in a sitting position, surrounded by plastic sheeting, with my head clamped into a fixed position. I couldn't hear any noise. I couldn't smell or feel anything, but I was aware that the surgical team were behind me, leaning over and above me as they worked.

In front was Justin, wearing scrubs and booties. He told me later that he had seen blood everywhere, but I was put under a general anaesthetic so the team could open up my skull, then I was brought partly round. O'Neill asked Justin and me to chat and so we did, just ordinary stuff about our home and lives. The team had planned to have French and Spanish speakers present, as I studied languages at Exeter University, but nobody could be found, so I was asked to count in both, to check that O'Neill wasn't cutting out the bits of brain where that knowledge was stored. Had I stopped speaking at any point, the operation would have been halted, and I'd have had chemo or radiotherapy to kill what was left of the tumour. (In the end, there was no need.) Finally, O'Neill told the anaesthetist to put me under again so his team could close the wound, which they did using 50 staples. At 3pm, after six hours, the operation was over. The tumour had been the size of large tangerine.

MY HUSBAND TOLD ME LATER THAT HE HAD DECIDED NOT ACTUALLY TO LOOK INTO MY OPENED CRANIUM

My recovery was seamless. That night I was taken back to my room; I was discharged the following Friday. Six monthly checkups since have shown no recurrence, and although the cancer could come back, I feel hopeful. Before I left hospital, O'Neill came to see me and asked if I had plans for the weekend. "We're going to Henley regatta," I told him. "Would you like to come as our guest?" So a week after life-saving surgery, I found myself sitting on the bank of the Thames, sipping champagne and laughing with friends, who couldn't believe what had happened. I might have struggled, too, had I not seen the surgery for myself. ●

The Brain Tumour Research Campaign is holding its annual Amber Ball at the Hurlingham Club, London SW6, on Friday, July 9; wayside-entr.org