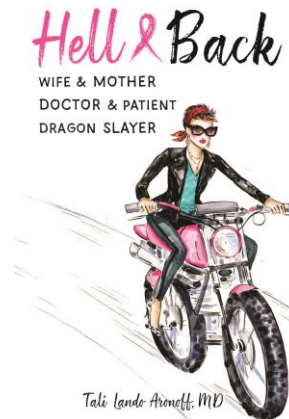


Sample Chapter from



Road Trip!

My previous visit to Dr. Gayle had been disappointing. He thought that the skin overlying the left implant had signs of long-term radiation-induced changes. This meant it was thinner and fibrotic. He did not think nipple reconstruction on that side was a good option. Even worse, he was now concerned about another complication called “implant exposure.” In this situation, the tissue overlying the implant breaks down to the point that a secondary surgery is often necessary to repair it. This other surgery involves the rotation of a skin-muscle flap. It’s a big deal when it happens. It is another serious surgery with a prolonged recovery and long scar. Dr. Gayle thought this complication was unlikely to happen. But, he wanted to avoid further incisions and manipulation of the skin in that area. Neither of us wanted to take any risk.

Acute cutaneous reactions to radiation therapy are common. They typically start 1-2 weeks after the start of radiation and lasts through its duration. The severity of these skin changes ranges from mild redness to complete skin ulceration and sloughing. Radiation can also cause burns. Having ignored proper skin care guidelines, I was sure I’d have these problems. Yet, throughout my entire treatment course, my skin was normal and healthy. If not for the debilitating fatigue, I would have been convinced that the radiation techs had forgotten to turn on the machine. It didn’t occur to me to worry about late-stage

changes. Back then, concerns far into the future were still a luxury to me. Now, I was standing in Dr. Gayle's office as he pinched the skin over my left and right implants.

"See the difference? There's just no give on this side."

"So, what are my options now?"

"You can tattoo the left and reconstruct the right. Or, you can tattoo them both," he replied.

"Well, I've gone without nipples this long. Do I really need them again?"

He looked at me. *"That's a question only you can answer."*

I called Alex on the long familiar home from Brooklyn.

"I think this isn't such bad news. I'll just go ahead with the tattooing on both sides and be done with all of this."

There was an extremely long pause after I told him. I thought we'd been disconnected.

"Hello, are you there?"

"Yes, I'm still here."

"Why are you so quiet?"

"I'm processing."

"Processing what? Are you upset?"

"I don't want to say anything. It's your body and your decision. I just thought you'd want... you know... ultimately...to be complete again."

"You mean I'd want that or you would???"

I started to get angry again and indignant, but I managed to stop myself. Alex's disappointment really surprised me. He was much more upset than I expected. At first, I struggled to understand why. Unsettling questions began to swirl around in my thoughts. Alex's unfaltering attraction to me was something I relied on as a formidable truth. What if it was a lie? Eventually, I calmed myself down. I realized that all the recent changes that had scarred me emotionally and physically, impacted him too. It was normal and fair for him to care about the final anatomical product.

On the other hand, what choice did I have?

Ultimately, without the possibility of nipple symmetry, I thought the option of unilateral reconstruction wasn't worth it. It was time to travel to Finksburg to meet Vinnie.

Road Trip!

For working mothers, one of the most precious commodities we have is time. We just don't have enough of it and we can't get more of it. That is why I felt especially grateful when my hardworking friends Karen and Debbie offered to take two days off from their busy work schedules to drive with me to Maryland. I had decided that I needed some closure. By closure, I mean nipples.

I picked up Karen and Debbie and loaded my Subaru with various snacks and drinks for the ride. As we backed out of my driveway, "Sweet Home Alabama" blasted in the background. Our exit from White Plains would have been so much cooler in a cherry red convertible with leather seats and the top down. I wish I could have justified the splurge.

Our drive down to Maryland was filled with bubbly conversation, about our jobs, our husbands and our children's talents and struggles. Deeper into South Jersey, we talked about our childhoods, our sibling-in-law interactions, and our college boyfriends. With my two girlfriends on the open road, I felt like myself again. It was cathartic and invigorating, especially because I it would culminate in my arrival at Little Vinnies.

By the time we arrived in Maryland, it was dark. I had booked a one-night stay in the nearby town of Westminster at a place called "The Boston Inn." The tiny road leading to the Inn was deserted and winding, straight out of a horror flick. After twenty nail-biting minutes on that road, we arrived safely and unloaded into our first-floor room. It was a basic, acceptably clean motel, unlike its name suggested. Two bottles of wine later, we were all feeling happy. There were no screaming kids, no "Please Mommy just one more story," no one complaining, "I don't want to go to bed!" It was heavenly, relaxing and quiet. Maybe, a bit too quiet. Karen was convinced we'd be murdered in our sleep. A few hours later, despite her fears, the three of us passed out crisscrossed on the beds. In the morning, we were still alive, though a tad hungover.

We grabbed a quick brunch and arrived at the strip mall storefront housing Little Vinnies. As promised, it was the complete tattoo parlor experience. There were multiple booths off the main waiting area in which you could hear the buzzing of electric needles. After a short wait, out came Vinnie in his goatee and Fedora, just as I had pictured him. We were ushered into his private office which was recently remodeled. On the floor, there lay a black and white tiger rug. Debbie and Karen plopped down on the long white leather couch.

"Do you mind if I have my assistant take some photographs?"

My discomfort at stripping down in front of “medical” strangers had long been abandoned. I didn’t hesitate to show my scars to Vinnie and my friends because I wasn’t ashamed.

Vinnie eyed me carefully. He took some measurements and looked at me from various angles. I wasn’t prepared for what he said next.

“I can’t do it. You won’t be happy. Your left implant is rotated. I’m sure of it.”

“It is?”

Vinnie was absolutely convinced that the only remedy was surgical correction. He was impressively knowledgeable having logged many hours of observation in the operating room observing implant surgeries with a local plastic surgeon.

“Here, let me show you.”

He wheeled his chair over to the desk and pulled out a clear, rectangular plastic box with two silicone nipples inside.

“May I?”

“Yup, go right ahead.”

“So, the tattoos would be positioned, here and here.” He applied the fake nipples to my skin and they stuck temporarily.

He directed me towards a full-length mirror.

“You see, to put it bluntly, the headlights would be shining in different directions.”

I saw his point. I asked Vinnie to take a few pictures on my phone. Then, I excused myself to call Dr. Gayle. Uncharacteristically, he picked up his cell. I explained the situation, that I was all the way in Finksburg. I texted him the images.

“I do not think the implant could have rotated. But, you’ll have to come back to see me in person.”

“Of course. Ok. I get it.”

I hung up with Dr. Gayle and walked back to Vinnie’s office. Karen and Debbie were waiting patiently.

“I have to go back.”

I kept it cool while my heart was sinking. No closure for me. Not today, at least.

Vinnie handed me the box.

“I’m sorry. You can keep these, to show your surgeon.”

“Excellent, thanks. I’ll do that.”

The three of us returned to the car. I placed my box of nipples in the glove compartment. We drove for an hour in silence. What was there to say?

Karen and Debbie waited for my meltdown. It never came.

“Do you mind if we stop in Allentown? I want to show you where I grew up.”

“Sure, whatever you need.”

Allentown is the small town in Pennsylvania where I lived until I was fourteen. It was a small detour off the route back to White Plains. On the way, we passed by the endless corn fields that I remembered from my youth. Off Route 22, just past the Lehigh Valley Mall, I exited onto Cedarcrest Blvd. A few blocks later, I turned left onto Arch Street and parked in front of 1231 North Arch Street, the home my mother designed and built over three and half decades ago. The house had been neglected over the years. The once carefully manicured landscaping was overgrown and half-dead. The dark brown shutters looked shabby. The paint on the basketball hoop at the end of the driveway, that my parents had erected when I was ten, was peeling and the net was torn.

It all felt so familiar and yet so much had changed.

I stood there in silence for a while, allowing all childhood memories to dance around in my mind: kite flying in the empty lot down the block, scootering with J.J. without a helmet down the steep hill, that time I ran away from home with my favorite toys wrapped in a sheet until my father found me down the block on his return from work.

Back in the car and on the road, it was Debbie who asked.

“Aren’t you going to freak out? We came all this way and just to be turned away without doing anything.”

“I know I should. I just can’t.”

“Why not? I would.”

“At this point, I have to roll with the punches. There is no other choice, or I’ll go crazy. Thank you, though, for being here, for coming with me. I know how impossible it is to take off work. I really appreciate it, a lot.”

At ten thirty pm, when I arrived back home, after nine hours of driving in two days, I was tired and defeated. I crawled into bed where Alex was still awake.

“The trip was a bust. I can’t believe it.”

“I know Babes, it stinks. It really does. It will happen. Eventually, you’ll be back... and I’d like it, if next time, we could go together.”

“Really? You would want to? I thought the whole idea of nipple tattooing might weird you out.”

“Well, I wouldn’t necessarily watch it being done. I would go to be there with you, as a team.”

I had made this mistake before, wrongly assuming it was better to spare him from something than to allow him to be a part of it. In truth, I hadn’t even asked him if he wanted to come with me. I had labeled it as a girl’s trip without giving him the option of coming.

“I had this idea, of renting motorcycles and buying bikers jackets and riding down to Maryland together.”

“You did? I had no idea.”

“Yes. You never gave me the chance to tell you.”

“I’m sorry, let’s go to sleep. We can talk about it in the morning.”

I fell asleep quickly that night, exhausted from all the driving. I had the most wonderful dream: Hitting the open road, riding my hog with Alex alongside me in matching black leather gear. I had on my favorite pink lipstick, dangling earrings, and big black sunglasses. On my head was this bright red bandana that looked so cool. And this time, I was wearing it by choice.