

lifestory

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chemotherapy, radiation treatments and the various effects of the steroids and buffering drugs she imbibed as part of the curative process, Brooks says her seven-month breast cancer journey was a surprisingly positive experience. “By the end of the radiation treatments I was completely strung out, but three weeks later it felt like nothing had ever happened. I had a complete return of vitality.”

The incredible waves of support she got from friends all over the world, she adds, also took her breath away. She got care packages from the States (where she lives when she isn't in Sydney) with everything from beautiful little boutique jams to copies of *The National Enquirer* for a giggle. Laughing, she points out, was a critical part of her healing. Brooks is not sure how well she would have fared, for example, without her Billy Connolly tapes and the countless Australian comedy series friends gave her to watch. While Buddhist friends prayed in Tibetan monasteries, others collected holy water from Lourdes and yet others tied prayer flags around holy rocks in Kurdistan in honour of their friend. Meanwhile, Brooks and family were watching comedy DVDs until their sides hurt. With her chuckles peppering the entire interview, it's clear that laughter is Brooks's medicine of choice.

She doesn't laugh, though, when you ask her when she has felt closest to death. Her answer is almost instantaneous, and it has nothing to do with breast cancer. She never

felt her mortality more acutely, she explains, than when she was covering the Gulf War in the early '90s and had negotiated with Kurdish guerillas to cross the Tigris river to visit the settlements of those rising up against Saddam Hussein. She was driving with two other foreign correspondents to the Turkish border when Hussein's helicopter gunships began to strafe the retreating Kurds... Brooks and her compatriots happened to be in tow.

“One of the world's most famous war photographers, who has also covered the Vietnam War, was with me in the car and he muttered something about his will not being in order. Until then, I was being really calm, but I did think then, ‘Shiiiiit, if Don McCullen is worried, that must be a bad thing!’” Brooks laughs grimly at the recollection.

“That time was probably the best and worst of my days as a foreign correspondent,” says Brooks. “It was wonderful because we were able, after weeks of negotiation, to finally talk to the Kurdish guerillas and tell their side of the story. It was fantastic to see people seizing their freedom and being able to tell each other their stories about what had happened in Halapja [where an infamous poison gas attack by the Hussein-led Iraqi army killed an estimated 5,000 Kurds in 1988]. The whole world knew about the killings, but some Kurds themselves didn't know.

“It was exhilarating to feel that you were witnessing history going right, for once, and then it all turned around so terribly when President Bush [the First] allowed Saddam to use his helicopter gunships... and the result was another slaughterhouse! One of my colleagues got killed - as did the young Kurdish man,

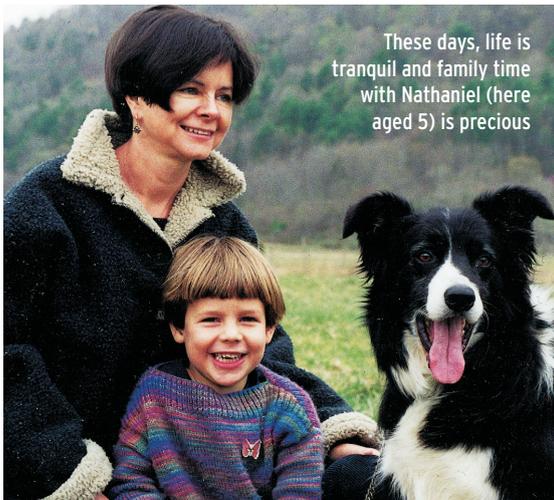


Baktiar, who was looking after us. It was horrible.” Brooks stops for air.

After the Gulf War, there was the civil war in Somalia, and after that the Serbo-Croatian clashes in Bosnia. Brooks reported on and survived all three and thereafter made the gradual career transition, following the birth of her son, from foreign correspondent to author. As her days as a war correspondent ended, Brooks noted how her constant migraines and eye twitches abated.

“There is a lot of responsibility to write lucidly about things, even if you don't always consciously feel it,” she explains. “Yet, despite everything, I think being a war correspondent was good for my soul. It certainly woke me up to the value of life and to the unbelievable diversity of human behaviour, both the best and the worst...”

These days Brooks tends to write books full-time in the tranquil village of Waterford, Virginia - population 250 - on the edge of a creek and a deer-filled forest. Her husband also works from home; he paces while Brooks prefers long walks with her border collie or spending time with her son Nathaniel, now nine, during her writing downtimes.



These days, life is tranquil and family time with Nathaniel (here aged 5) is precious