



'I HOPE I NEVER HAVE "THAT CONVERSATION" WITH MY DAUGHTER'

When Emma Parlons (right), 41, discovered she carried the BRCA gene, she didn't hesitate about having a double mastectomy and ovary removal. Now, the prospect of having 'that conversation' with her daughter is something that fills her with dread...

AS TOLD TO MIRANDA LEVY
PHOTOS: RICK PUSHINSKY

'DURING THE LAST school half-term, I was on the Tube with my eight-year-old daughter. "Mummy," Sophie piped in her high, clear voice. "What's breast cancer?" Half the carriage stopped in their tracks and looked round. "Is that what you had?"

'As it happens, I didn't have breast cancer. But around five years ago, I discovered that I was a carrier of the BRCA gene. It's what Angelina Jolie has – a genetic mutation that gives you an 85 per cent lifetime chance of contracting breast cancer and a 40 per cent chance of ovarian cancer. Like Angelina, I went through a double mastectomy – and I also opted for ovary removal – to save my own life.

'Rewind three years more. My 45-year-

old cousin on my father's side discovered she had breast cancer. The obligatory medical history check revealed that three of my paternal aunts had also had the disease. Dad decided to be tested for the gene, to save me the agony if his result had come back negative. I didn't want to know the result. Still, the call came through when I was on holiday. Dad had tested positive, which meant it was 50/50 that I would, too. Sick to my stomach, I went to be tested as soon as we returned.

"Do you really want to know this?" asked the doctor who would carry out the genetic test. The knowledge would be a heavy burden. Not finding out would mean a life of not-so-blissful ignorance, but ▶