

When Christine decided to have her breasts enlarged, her 77-year-old mother insisted on having hers done, too. And now they've both had face-lifts...

Elizabeth Udall meets a mother and daughter who chose an unusual way to bond



photographs by
jason bell

a daughter wanting to spend some quality time with her mother might suggest they go for lunch or perhaps even treat themselves to a stay at a health farm. But Christine Leavey and her mother Betty Smith have never gone in for such indulgence, and the idea of having to make time for each other is alien to them.

The women have a relationship that's close "but not claustrophobic", Christine says. It's a consistent but easy mix of quick calls and popping-ins. So when each felt she had a bit of money to spare and was finally in a position to fulfil an ambition they shared, it would have been natural for them to do so together. But Christine's announcement that she was going to Poland to have breast augmentation surgery last November was not an invitation for her mother to join her. "I was scared," she says. "After all, my mum is 77 years old." Betty was outraged by this.

"We had both wanted to have it done for ten years," says Betty. "But I had had the idea first. I told Christine she was not going without me." The recollection alone brings a setting of her jaw and a fix of her gaze that make it obvious that with Betty contradiction is futile and possibly dangerous. But it quickly became clear to her daughter she had to try to convince her mum not to go with her.

Christine, 44, had thoroughly researched ECS, the company she had chosen from some literature provided by the Breast Implant Information Society. She knew the company had arranged surgery in Poland for more than 200 women, but was still apprehensive about going overseas for an operation. "So I spent a lot of time speaking at length with past ►

clients." Eventually she felt satisfied that she should go ahead with her plan.

"But when mum entered the picture and the company director commented that my mum was the oldest person ever to have considered embarking on this, and then mum's GP started making worried noises, I felt incredibly nervous. I tried to persuade mum to let me go first and try it out. But she was adamant."

Betty's GP asked for the Polish surgeon's qualifications and insisted that, as a 77-year-old woman contemplating surgery that would require general anaesthesia, Betty should have a full medical check. She was given a clean bill of health and her medical history was sent to Poland. But the GP made it clear he still did not approve and even put his feelings in writing to Betty's surgeon.

Betty's seven other children were horrified. This was not a necessary procedure and their mother was taking a huge risk. "My eldest daughter, Janet, was very upset," says Betty. "I love her very much and she's been very good to me. Yet she could barely bring herself to talk to me when I told her what I was going to do." But her family's desperate pleas fell on deaf ears. Betty was unwavering in her resolve.

So in December last year Betty boarded the plane to Wrocław in western Poland with her reluctant travelling companion. "I chose not to intervene during all the bickering," says Christine. "I felt it would be patronising to mum and it might have caused more family friction. But there was this enormous weight of family disapproval on my shoulders. It had been mum's decision but I knew that she would never have gone to Poland alone. If I changed my mind, it would stop mum. But I wanted to have this done, I didn't want to change my mind. So if something went wrong, I would have to take full responsibility for it."

But Christine was reassured that she and Betty had been booked into a hospital, rather than the normal clinic. "I had insisted we be kept together and that I have the surgery first so that I would be awake when mum came round, in case she was distressed."

Christine's fears were unfounded, and she and Betty have only praise for the post-operative care they received. Says Christine, "It was a huge relief to be somewhere no one knows you and in a peaceful setting where you have time to recuperate." The women's approval rating is no doubt more than a little influenced by that setting, a picturesque castle to which all clients are sent to convalesce.



Betty and Christine's new bras (above); mother and daughter after the surgery (right)

A second pot of tea is brewing at Christine's large house in the Home Counties. It's six weeks since their second lot of surgery – after the breast augmentation, they returned to the clinic for a face-lift. Betty is laughing about her trip to the garden centre the day before. "It was pensioner's afternoon when they give a discount and I hadn't realised. But when I told the girl on the checkout that I was a pensioner she refused to believe me and became quite irritated. She clearly thought I was trying it on." And at the hairdresser earlier in the week – Betty told the stylist to keep the scars behind her ears covered – she met a male acquaintance. "He said, I swear you look

younger every time I see you, Betty." Next week she is having surgery on her under-eye area.

Christine fans photographs out on the kitchen table – women huddle together wearing hats and overcoats in front of a snowy backdrop. They could be anyone's winter holiday snaps. But the interior shots give the game away. These pictures were clearly taken at the beginning of their ten-day stay. Christine and Betty are beaming at the camera despite the bandaging and

swelling. In another shot they stand with an arm around their surgeon. "He was wonderful," says Betty reverentially.

Television footage of a woman having breast augmentation haunted Christine prior to her trip. "Seeing this incision they make under your breast, then the way the surgeon stuffs the implant and his fist under the flap of skin... I would be lying if I said it didn't make me question whether I could go through with it. But the surgeon was friendly and reassuring. And we had barely changed into our gowns on arrival at the hospital when we were being given pre-med drugs, so there wasn't much time for second thoughts."

An element of apprehension remained for Christine on the return trip to Poland

for a man. Equally I didn't do it because I'm lonely and feel this will improve my chances of getting a husband. In fact, yesterday was the two-year anniversary of my husband's death and I still haven't come to the end of the grieving process.

"And I'm not reacting to some sudden awareness of my mortality. I am not afraid of getting old or trying to deny the inevitable outcome of that. The last thing I want is to be left behind when all my friends have gone. I took the decision to have cosmetic surgery purely for me. I just got fed up with my reflection in the mirror. I thought, I am in a position where I can afford cosmetic surgery, I don't have to live looking like this, so why should I?"

'I thought: I don't have to live looking like this, so why should I?'

– there would be no hospital stay this time. "But they were using twilight, rather than general anaesthesia for the face-lifts, so the risk to the patient is reduced."

Betty's third trip next week will be made alone. "All my grandchildren have been so supportive. They say, 'You look great, Nan.'" But despite having their mother back in one enhanced and very satisfied piece, her children remain less enthusiastic. "I've told no one else, only family. It's a pity my children can't be more happy for me, but I can deal with that. I didn't want to have to cope with what everyone else thought, the 'Fancy doing that at her age' comments."

Despite her reservations regarding her mum's health, Christine wholeheartedly supports Betty's wish to have cosmetic surgery. "Mum brought eight of us up and everything she did was for the family and that's continued to be the case. It was about time she did something for herself and if this is what she chose then that's up to her."

"It's made such a difference to mum. She wears a bit more make-up now and takes time over her hair and clothes. I am not trying to imply that she didn't have any self-respect before, that she was a mess. Perhaps no one else would notice the change, it's quite subtle. But I can see how much more confidence the surgery has given her."

Betty is fully aware of the conclusions which may be drawn from her actions over the past four months. "I've been a widow for two years and without a partner for the whole time, so I didn't do this



'Mum brought up eight of us...it was about time she did something for herself'

Mother and daughter had modest expectations of the breast augmentation. Both women chose an increase of only one cup size and are very happy with the results. In fact, Christine is so happy that she lifts her crisp white shirt and her bra and does a bit of showing off. "The scars are very small, aren't they? And they are hidden by my breasts." She pulls the white lacy bra back down. "It sounds silly but it's great to buy a bra without a bit of padding in sight. I think my clothes look better now. But I haven't changed what I wear. I'm not going for any plunging necklines. I may feel a lot better about myself but I'm not prepared to be mutton dressed as

lamb." Betty, in white polo neck, black skirt and navy blazer agrees. "It's as simple as putting on a jumper and just feeling better about your shape. I feel more womanly."

Christine's husband, Sean, is 44 and a quantity surveyor, and she runs a bed and breakfast business. After 25 years of marriage and four children, they felt they were in a position to fund Christine's surgery. Sean has no complaints about the outcome – but their daughter Sarah, who's 21 and studying engineering at university, was concerned that her mum's motivation was exclusively to please her dad. "I reassured her as much as I could and now she understands, she can see the difference it's made to my self-esteem. And my relationship with Sean hasn't altered at all, it's always been great."

"Christine's had her stresses, that's part of life," says Betty. "But she's moved on now and so have her looks."

"People turn into martyrs about their wrinkles," adds Christine. "Everyone has different priorities. Some choose to give their house a face-lift or change their car – I did it with my face and breasts. I didn't want a dramatic transformation. I just told them not to make me look like I was in a wind tunnel."

And £12,000 and nearly 400 stitches later Betty and Christine have no regrets. "This wasn't a whim," says Christine. "We'd thought long and hard about it. I felt a pang of guilt, that I was being selfish to spend so much money on myself. But I've worked hard – we both have – to be in this financial position."

Betty is insistent: "Christine and I are not obsessive about our looks or our age and we didn't want to change our lives." Christine agrees: "Our life is our family, not in the rat race comparing ourselves to other people. I appreciate my children and my husband, the life I have."

"But this has given us a boost," says Betty. "Now we can enjoy that life just a little bit more." And Christine has no doubt that the experience has been a rite of passage for their relationship. "Overcoming the objections and fears surrounding mum; travelling to a country we'd never visited before to have surgery; recovering together – that has created a special bond." ●