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The Girl with Nine Wigs: How One Woman Coped with Cancer at Just 21 Years Old

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POSTED ON OCTOBER 15, 2015 AT 9:20AM EST

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After Sophie van der Stap was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of cancer at 21, she began to lose her self-esteem, her identity and then, finally, her hair.

“I was so young,” van der Stap, now 32, tells PEOPLE. “It was tremendously important for me to still be able to be a part of life, to be a woman, to be a girl. My thought was: Maybe I’ll never turn 30, maybe I’ll never turn 25, and I don’t want to die without having experienced a few more things. At 21 I was still very much discovering my femininity.”

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Van der Stap, who has been in full remission from Rhabdomyosarcoma for around 10 years, is sharing her story in a new memoir, *The Girl With Nine Wigs* (St. Martin's Press, available now). The book chronicles the unique coping mechanism she used to help get her through the cancer and treatment: She collected nine wigs, all with different looks, names and personalities.

"The wigs came, and they were a way of escaping my illness," the author, originally from Holland, tells PEOPLE. "And in the eyes of other people I was a normal girl, even a trendy girl. All the wigs brought something out in me. When I would put the wig on and the makeup, it was such a transformation from the no hair, no eyelashes, no eyebrows."

She named her first wig Stella. She describes it as "rigid," and a means of learning "who she is not."

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Stella

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Says van der Stap, “Stella was a necessary wig. My hair fell out overnight. Having dinner with a friend, I said, ‘I don’t think my hair will fall out that soon.’ Then the next day it fell out and was all gone. I chose Stella because I was told this was all there was. Stella had a bit of the same hair color I had. I just looked like I had a haircut. I wanted to be able to hide my story.”

As she collected more hairpieces, van der Stap found her new identities thrilling, even as she suffered through about 14 months of chemotherapy and years of recovery.

“People on the street believed me, and thought I was this woman in front of them, a healthy, sensual woman,” she says. “Unconsciously, I think, I was experimenting with my femininity. It led me to my feminine identity, which is I



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think for every girl a process of many years.”

After Stella came eight others:

- “Sue,” a short red wig

Sue

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Explains van der Stap, “My uncle works in the opera building in Amsterdam, and he told me the opera singers often wear wigs. It was like a big candy shop. All the wigs were on display. I went with Annabel, my best friend. It became fun, as if you are shopping in H&M and trying on funny dresses. I tried all these different haircuts, and Sue was really pretty on me. The bangs helped to hide the fact I didn’t have eyebrows. Sue stood out with the red hair, as if to say, don’t f— with me. I felt bigger than myself. That day I ordered Daisy ”

- “Daisy,” long, blonde and curly

Daisy

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“This was where the femininity part came in,” she says. “With the long curly hair and the bangs, it added so much to my being, so much confidence. Of course, I didn’t only look nice, I looked very different. Daisy got a lot of attention, so that was a reason I would not always wear her.”

- “Blondie,” short and blonde

Blondie



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“She is a short blonde bob, my only real hair wig. It’s more of a simple haircut.”

- “Platina,” a shiny, white bob.

Platina

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Van der Stap says, “She was a party wig. She was the first wig with whom it was clear I was wearing a wig. With the other wigs people wouldn’t be able to tell, but Platina is a clear synthetic wig. It was fun, it was a very good moment to say okay, I have a bald head and I’ll put a funny wig on it.”

- “Uma,” an auburn wig with fringe bangs, inspired by Uma Thurman’s character in *Pulp Fiction*

Uma

// RVDA

“Uma was very sensual. I bought her for like 52 euros,” says the author.

- “Pam,” natural-looking blonde locks, very girl next door

Pam

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Says van der Stap, “I could’ve stopped buying wigs after Pam. She was a bit of a [Jennifer Aniston](#) haircut at the time, simple blonde hair, but always in perfect condition. Two women asked me for my hairdresser when I wore

Pam.

- “Lydia” was warm, auburn, ’60s style hair, and a gift from van der Stap’s father’s friend, Bebé.

Lydia

// RVDA

“Lydia is stunning,” says the author. “She was given to me by my godmother in Spain.”

- “Bebé,” exotic, sexy long blonde hair, a tribute to the real life Bebé

Bebamp#233;

// RVDA

“This was more of an emotional moment, where [a boyfriend] broke up with me. I felt like I could just be someone else, someone he doesn’t recognize.”

The Wigs Today

Van der Stap says she doesn’t use the wigs much these days. As she commutes between New York and Paris as a natural dark blonde, she is occasionally asked for advice on how to deal with cancer.

“For me, what was very important was to find a safe haven that has nothing to do with the ugly reality of cancer, where you can escape to,” she says. “For me that was my wigs, but it can be cooking or painting or it can be a park where you

like to go every day, where you actively do something.”

She adds, “Something I would say to people being scared of cancer, I believe very much in the importance of nutrition, and a good, healthy lifestyle.”

The lessons she’s learned and shares, she says, came in part due to her ability to express herself with the wigs.

“To hear at 21 that you’re probably dying is, of course, something that affects you the rest of your life,” van der Stap says. “Afterward, you’re just so conscious of the uncertainty of life.”

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