

MEGHAN FLAHERTY

WOMB

12 September 1985: Thursday afternoon

“So it’s cancer.”

Uterine. Carcinosarcoma. Malignant matter. Unwelcome growth.

“You have three options,” said the doctor on the phone. “Go home and get pregnant; you can take nine months. You can take a week, go home and sort out your affairs. Or you can have the surgery tomorrow.”

She thought of her empty efficiency apartment, her recently broken heart. There wasn’t much to rearrange.

“Tomorrow will be fine.”

The woman who adopted me put down the telephone. Because it was 1985, the phone in Doctors’ Hospital in Hollywood, Florida, was pink, mauve really, with a matching spiral cord. Plastic nestled into plastic with a clap.

“What’s the matter, Ellen? You don’t look so good.” That was the woman in the adjoining bed, a girl with cluster headaches and a boyfriend with Tourette’s. Mum had already beat the docs to the conclusion that those facts related causally. “Bad news?”

Mum did not want to chat. Her reproductive organs had been flagged for bulldozing. But she had the magic word to shut them up, a word she wasn’t used to saying yet.

“Well,” she started. And then plainly: “I have cancer.”

“wooooooP! Woop woop woooOOOoop,” went the boyfriend, shoulders jerking, arms aflap. His eyes and elbows twitched.

“Shh, shh,” said the girl in bed.

Twitch. Woop. “You have cancer!? Weeee woooooP.”

“Shh, honey, shh!”

An orderly was prompted to investigate.

“Is everything o—?”

“Cancer!” Twitch. Woop. “C-c—Ellen has c-ancer.” The boyfriend stuttered, blinked.

“No, no, no,” my mother said. “It’s going to be okay. Calm down.” There was compassion in her voice. She didn’t want to call attention. She didn’t want to cause the girl another migraine, more injections, pain.

The room went still.

Sometime after the daily deluge, around four p.m., when rain rose steaming from the parking lot and the full-force sun whined back to life, the doctor called again. Bad news blaring from the cheery plastic phone. My mother answered on the second ring. “Yes?”

The roommate slept, the day’s diversion past. The twitcher went for coffee in the cafeteria. Shade crept across the sea-green walls.

“This is Dr. Birzon calling back,” he said, though who else would have had the number? He felt bad. He owed her some counsel, some concern. He was sorry. He should have been there to deliver the results. He didn’t usually handle situations in this manner. *Situations*, he said. Not patients, people. Not a woman, women. Just organs. Consent and operating rooms.

(My mother made a face then that I’ve seen a million times—mirthless incredulity—her low mouth loosing open even as her upper lip contracts in jest. She gives a manic laugh that sounds more like a cough. As always follows, she grates out a throaty “hah.”)

“Okay,” she said. “It’s fine. I think the time has passed.” Bygones, Doctor B. Thank you for this amusing day. She surveyed the sleeping roommate, the boyfriend’s empty chair askew. “I mean—it’s just—so much has happened. Since this morning.”

Well, all right, he said. He would see her tomorrow for the operation. Was there anyone that she should call?

No, she thought. She would lose her womb alone, under the fluorescent lights.

1968

My mother remembers menstruation. She had two older sisters, no big deal. Karen was mean, and Lauren was her closest friend. She was the seventh kid of nine. She was in seventh grade. It was just another hand-me-down ordeal.

She climbed up to the dinner table, a massive thing bowed with post-post-war delectables, with two benches crammed on either side to seat the kids.

“Mum,” she whispered to hard-hearted Dorothy with the pin-curved hair. “It started.”

Grammy’d seen it coming and had already purchased the supplies. Karen, the oldest, had taken her upstairs and told her what to do. She’d strapped the crazy bridal thing around her hips with torture hooks and vampire tools. The maxi-pad gauze through the slip, hooked onto spiky metal teeth. It was wide and slippery. Not terribly attractive, unpretty. Maybe a little scary. “Like you’re on a horse,” said Lauren, as she squeezed her hand and smiled.

“Well, then,” Grammy said. And served the elbow macaroni.

The next day, walking home from junior high, my mother was insufferable to Nancy Freeman, who hadn’t gotten hers yet.

“I have become a *woman* now,” she said, picturing her ripe pink organs. “I have my *period*. I can build a nest now, in my uterus, and make babies.” She waxed precocious. “I could have *babies* now.” The subtext being: “You can’t, Nancy Freeman.” You can’t, but I can.

It was mean—but Mum was the girl before the last blue-ribbon cherub girl and the hydrocephalic infant boy. Ellen, that is, troublesome Ellen: a chatty thing, bright and verbal, wishing she weren’t always in the way. Between anonymity and attention. “Yellin’ Ellen,” said her brothers and her cousins. The mean kids called her Pizza Face. She smoked on corners, snuck off to museums. She wanted to grow up Jewish or a nun; the Sisters of Saint Mary were fearful either way.

Womanhood was the only club ever to admit her, apart from girls’ field hockey, who’d wanted someone fun for on the bus. So she lorded it over Nancy Freeman. And she felt superior in her medieval horse-diaper menstrual belt, loving her childhood fantasy of maidenhood that happened once a month. The blood looked like feathers too, with little dark flecks in among the red.

Until the summer at Cape Cod, when everyone went swimming in the river: Lauren handed her a box of tampons and locked her in the boathouse bathroom. She went through three or four. “It feels so weird,” she said through the wood cracks of the door, “it must be in wrong.”

“Oh, just leave it *in*. We’re going swimming,” Lauren said, and that was that.

At fourteen, Ellen learned to shave her legs.

When Karen ran off with a married man, the other girls were left to pay the price of those bad choices with their mother's wrath. Lauren was sick but moved to Boston anyway. Mum graduated high school and went with her, studying to be a secretary. After Karen, that was the only education Grammy would consent to pay for. "Take it and get out," she said. They did.

They decorated an apartment, had a lot of laughs. The McNamara girls who lived just past the Fens on Ivy Street. Mum was eighteen, Lauren twenty-four, when Lauren nearly died. Hospitalized for seven days. Diagnosis: lupus. She had six years.

My mother did not finish secretary school. She'd gone in for the exams but had drawn a blank. She cared for Lauren. Lauren cared for her, then sent her trundling along. To Florida, to live, to breathe. To break the mold. To be the one that got away.

"You have to live," her closest friend, her sister, said, hooked up to health insurance, tethered to that place. "I have to stay, but you can live."

86

Mum left. She'd learned to use a diaphragm by then. The pill. All those things that nuns and mothers never spoke of, rope ladder to a clubhouse left exposed. The lower-dosage birth control of the late sixties caused fewer heart attacks and strokes; it was safe to chew four days' worth in the morning if a girl forgot. My mother was emancipated. Free from family, free to be the red-hot gal she was. She became a waitress, a wanderer, a connoisseur of sex. Her name soon met with oohs and ahs among the men she bedded, but she hoped that someday one of them would love her back enough to stick around. Her zits had gone away. Her arms and legs were strong. Her hair was curly, cut real short.

She met a man who owned a boat. A boat they caulked and painted, rendered sturdy, then sailed across the ocean to the Atlantic isles. She loved him hard, until her bony frame went brown from standing naked in the sun. And then he left her, too.

1980–1984

The Florida she came back to had lost its shine. The bars were darker, dirtier. She didn't leave the house except to work. The restaurant was now exhaust-

ing—until the manager asked her out. They started dating on and off; his name was Tim. No pills this time—the diaphragm was lodged back in. She came to love him, too. She thought maybe this time she could be Mary Tyler Moore, and swing her hat up in the street, and make it after all.

These were her wild years, though: cocaine and booze. Emotions bloating in the tropic heat. Tim had started traveling. Lauren came to visit every year, but she was dying. Next Christmas, the kidney from their brother Kevin failed. Mum was not a match, but offered anyway. “No,” said Lauren. She didn’t want to battle anymore. March 22, 1984, before Mum’s plane took off, she died. Lauren slipped her coma in the darkened ICU, alone.

Tim spent the summer traveling. Ellen spent it doing coke and trying to forget. Her world had stopped when Lauren died. Her heart was turning into ribcage, into bone (or else it bled). The one person in the world she knew she’d lose (as if one could ever prepare oneself) was the one who never would have left. She hid behind the anemic irony of that and drank, and drank, and slept with men until Tim came back. *I’ll be traveling*, he’d said. *You should feel free to date while I’m away*. She’d clung too hard in grief, she guessed.

87

It was her birthday, September 20, 1984. Persephone had taken more of Lauren with her to the underworld. That was the year the Macintosh computer was introduced, the year Miss America had to abdicate her crown when photos surfaced from a *Penthouse* shoot. There had been winter Olympics in Sarajevo, summer Olympics in L.A. The Space Shuttle *Discovery* had looped its maiden orbit. Joe Kittinger had vaulted the Atlantic by himself, by gas balloon. Tim bought her a stereo and a TV for their apartment, which made her cry.

When they made love that night, she knew. It was Lauren coming back into the world, through her. “Crazy thinking, crazy woman, crazy times.”

They’d been together for three years. Tim was less than thrilled, but she was happy, very happy. She told her tables, the kitchen guys, and all her friends. Her nest was swelling with a bird.

A few weeks later, Tim said, “I don’t think I want a child.” He said, “Maybe it would be better you don’t keep it.” And he handed her a beer. He’d been seeing a woman out in California; she was on her way to Florida to be with him.

Ellen couldn’t raise a child on her own. Tim drove her to the back lot of a building, checked her in, and left her in a room of silent women. Someone

led her to another room, to a machine, a twilight sedative, steel instruments. Afterwards, she remembers yet another room with other women, lying on mattresses low to the floor. She was one of 75,800 women to have an abortion in the state that year. She remembers being given orange juice. Tim picked her up. She spent a few days lying cramping on his bed. Leaving behind some spots of blood, a damp impress of tears—before he moved her out and moved the other woman in.

It was altogether too much loss. She upped the drinking, the cocaine. She went back on the pill and slept with men to blur the sharpness between everybody else's real and her remembered. The efficiency was spare, as if she'd given up trying. One too many unfilled spaces. Barren nest. One too many days spent sprucing up unlivable surroundings. There was that hollow new-apartment sound, cars outside on pavement hissing, air-conditioning vents. This one was cheaper, too. Maybe the refrigerator rattled; maybe the slat blinds were caked with stubborn dust.

88

She brought her things inside, unpacked them more or less, her accumulated treasures, statuettes and charms. Some books, *The Little Pictorial Lives of the Saints*. A photo here and there. She bought the same new household things: hand towels and a dish-drying rack. Some years later she would teach me the same routine, of overcoming moving in. Sponges wrung and surfaces degreased. Cabinets lined with self-adhesive scented paper. The things that women do to build a home. Her possessions a little stranger in each new place.

Through the window were the ever-present palms. Still there graying, swaying in the midday heat. Darkening with rain, then drying against a swatch of blue. They threw long spidery shadows and a rustling sound with every jet of wind. They were every reason she had gone there in the first place.

13 September 1985: Friday afternoon

She could see them from the hospital bed. It was one week shy of one year to the day she had conceived. She'd been admitted for some tests after a bad Pap smear, the annual exam most women flunk once or twice per lifetime. It was shitty rotten timing. Shitty rotten luck. One phone call, a sleepless overnight, the roommate's boyfriend with Tourette's. A nightmare stretched

across a single day. The radical hysterectomy, all parts removed. Process of castration. Laparotomy: one transverse incision in the abdomen, above the pubic bone, 55.2 minutes on the table. Awake from anesthesia before the next day's clockwork rain.

She spent five days in post-op, then six weeks convalescing. No work, no pay. Man gone, child dead, no sister close enough to call. Tim visited, sheepish, I'd imagine, but he'd become a demon to her. "You killed my only baby." That's the only thing she said. She used the plastic phone to call her mother after all. "I think misery is easy, Mum," she said, "compared to this." Dorothy booked a flight in time to take her daughter home. She stayed one month.

The rest was understandably dark. My mother drank enough to not remember most of it—and I would never ask. She drank enough to get to Christmas. Then, when she realized it wasn't working, she stopped, taking up cigarettes and coffee and the Niebuhr prayer. She found herself three summers later on a beach back home—a place she swore she'd never be—with yet another man. No birth control this time—it wasn't necessary.

"I love you," he said. As so many had said before. The high-tide waves rolled up the Salisbury shore. The sand was ankle-thick and cool and full of twigs and shells they couldn't see until she stepped on them. He held her hand. The black Atlantic hissed and roared.

She could not invest again without a guarantee. "Does this mean marriage?"

"Sure," he said. "Why not?"

That was my dad, pushing forty, twice divorced. I was five, and we were visiting my Nana, hiding from the very bad woman who'd given birth to me, his second wife. I was waifish, skittering at shadows, lurking around the neighbors' windows, wanting to be fed. Including Ellen's—that is how they met. I had brown eyes just like Lauren's, I am told. I carried treasures with me in a plastic lunchbox, with a change of underwear. I was a lost soul just like her, itinerant and mostly motherless—whichever way that counts. They married and I went to live with them. Long story short.

From 1980 through 1993, an estimated 8.6 million U.S. women underwent hysterectomy. The figures even out to around 650,000 every year. The premature menopause hits almost immediately. For as long as I recall, Mum had hot flashes, phantom pains, and the sag of slacked muscle where they'd cut through her abdominal wall. It took a long time before I trusted her enough to let her stand naked next to me under the shower. Her scar had turned her belly to a concave clown, depressive, not able to smile. Ellen's body was a mystery of freckled flesh, well-kept dainty woman's feet, big, spudlike curves, and finally two classic breasts with pencil erasers at the tips. She looked like every mother-goddess photo I have ever seen, even with the scar. Size 10 Venus on her half shell, with 1980s hair, dyed red. She drew me a map of women's organs so I'd understand. Some years later, she slipped *Our Bodies, Ourselves* onto my nightstand. Looking at the warm wet apple of the womb, I remember not believing that she couldn't make a baby of her own.

90 But I was hers. Without her, I would not have made it out of second grade. I would not have gotten past expecting to be tampered with by adult men. I would not have understood that sex means (also) love (sometimes). I would never have had the guts to use the tampon.

She later taught me how to shave my legs. She pierced my ears. And when the time came, drove me to Planned Parenthood, for contraceptives.

Somewhere in that time, I started saying "Mum."

In January 1999, Judge Pu made it legal. I was sixteen. My birth certificate was changed to read: Mother: Ellen Dorothy. Father: Anthony James. Date of birth: November 1983. Place of birth: a town in California she had never been to. But she was there, I like to think. We signed the papers. Outside, it was cold. She drove us home, or somewhere like it, where we nested in.