Cervix
By Beth M. Duckles

Looking up at the huge circular light pointed between my legs, I joke that I'm James Bond being tortured by Goldfinger. I stop myself from saying "No, Mister Bond, I expect you to die" because the two men between my legs aren't really laughing.

At first it was only the skinny doctor-in-training, vulnerable on his low stool. I wondered if I was supposed to feel more in control sitting higher than he on the examining table. Upright spine, he asked questions and explained. He wore bright, artistic socks and clear plastic-rimmed glasses that looked hipster cool. I liked him. I wondered if he was gay.

I scooted my hips to the end of the table and put each heel into a stirrup as he maneuvered the handle of the laser light and inserted a speculum. The doctor-in-charge opened the door and strode in while my legs were propped open. Arrogant and easy with words, he hovered over me while shaking my hand.

They both peered between my legs while the doctor-in-training told me that he was putting in the IUD first and then he'd do a pap smear. He put a clamp on my cervix and it felt like an instant cramp. The doctor-in-charge asked about my work. He had a theory about my work. He asked a question but already had the answer. The doctor-in-training did something else that hurt. I put my hand on my belly and tried to focus on breathing. Mom said that when she was pregnant with me she got used to having a bunch of people looking between her legs like this. After a while, she said it started to seem normal.

A few weeks later it is my thirty-eighth birthday and I am driving my boyfriend back to his house. Our relationship won't last. I receive a call from the doctor-in-charge on speakerphone in the car. "I need to talk to you about the results," he says.

"We found abnormal cells in your pap smear. We need to do more tests. The pathologist thinks that it is adenocarcinoma in situ. If so, we'll need to know if you want to have children because the treatment for it is an eventual hysterectomy. We don't know," he reiterates, "we have to do another test." I joke that he owes me one for giving me shitty news on my birthday. He sounds surprised and laughs that he owes me a beer. I wonder if he was in a fraternity.

After the call, I park the car and cry. I tell the man I'm in love with that I don't want to lose my uterus, that I'm afraid it will make me less of a woman. He says that lacking a uterus won't make him desire me any less. We talk about children. He is adamant that he doesn't want them and I am uncertain. I know that if I do have children, I don't want be a single parent like mom was.

Did I mention my boyfriend is a Zen monk? I'm not a Buddhist, but I've moved to Portland, Oregon and fallen in love with a Zen monk. He gives me a koan, a phrase or a riddle to concentrate on when I'm upset. It is "Sun-faced Buddha, Moon-faced Buddha." The words are incomprehensible but that's the whole idea of the koan. It feels like a gift. He asks if anything has changed since the moment that the doctor said the word *hysterectomy*. He asks me if I am hurting, or if I am any different than I was an hour before when we were laughing at my dining room table. He's right, nothing hurts, nothing has changed. That Zen shit works.

He has to go so I walk to a nearby restaurant and order carne asada tacos and a Negra Modelo. Mexican food—even crappy food like this—is comforting. I try to work out the spelling of adenocarcinoma on the tiny screen of my phone and a wave of grief crashes over me.

I want to talk to my mom, but she's dead. I blow my nose into the paper napkin tucked under the plate of tacos. The plastic table wobbles and I pick at the circle of muted gold foil on top of the beer. If mom were here, she'd make sure I felt loved. She'd listen as I told her I wasn't sure about having kids without a partner. She'd be there. The tears drip down my cheeks as I finish my plate of tacos. The waitress pretends not to notice.

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It takes over a month to schedule the test that determines what kind of cells are on my cervix. In that time, I alternate between fear and excessive research. I interrogate my best friend who is an emergency room doctor about the difference between squamous cells and adenocarcinoma cells. I read articles online and find books. I decide that the swaggering doctor is not for me and find a doctor who is like the hip grandmother I never had, calm and confident. I have a good feeling about her. I still don't know what I will say when she asks me about having children.

On the first visit, my new doctor moves her low stool beside where I sit on the crinkly paper. She uses words I know and draws pictures of a cervix, the small donut of flesh between my vagina and uterus. She explains that the test will take little samples for the pathologist. She describes the treatments depending on the results. My boyfriend has come with me and mentions something the other doctor said—his ability to quote someone verbatim is almost flawless. She responds with assurance: "That is wrong."

She asks if I want children and I say I don't know. She says they will act as though I do. I am relieved I don't have to make a decision. I ask a question using a diagram in a book I've found. She is delighted by the book and insists that the nurse write down the title. My boyfriend will tease me later that of course I found a book that the doctor hasn't seen yet.

She does the procedure with a sequence of devices lined up on the counter. My

boyfriend asks afterwards if it hurt. I brush him off saying it felt like cramps.

A week and a half later, the nurse calls me with the good news. Instead of finding the cells that mean that I better hurry the fuck up and have kids because they need to take out my uterus, I have the cells that mean they need to lop off a bit of my cervix and hope they get everything. I am relieved.

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I can see the top of my doctor's curly gray hair between the paper draping my legs as she opens and closes drawers. My hips are at the edge of the table with the round Goldfinger light pointed between my legs. She has turned on the machine they will use so I can listen to the whirring sound—the nurse probably told her I'm nervous. I can hear the faint guitar music they put on to relax me.

This shouldn't take longer than an hour and the recovery is only a couple of weeks. I try not to think about what a friend told me. It was horrible, she said—the recovery took forever. She would get up from the chair and feel her insides stretching and the wound breaking open again.

This is the easy one, I tell myself. This isn't what she had. I say the koan while looking into the bright orb above me. They ask why boyfriend isn't here and I tell them about his Zen group. They murmur a response.

The doctor injects adrenaline into my cervix. It hurts and my heart starts racing. They test to see if the pain is gone. It is. The whir of the machine starts up and the two women speak in an inscrutable patter of medical words. The doctor moves instruments assuredly in and out from between my legs.

Later, the doctor will tell me she cut four pieces from my cervix with the electrified wire loop. Three are stripes down the pink curved surface of my cervix. The fourth is called the "top hat," where she carves further into the hole where cells are growing towards my uterus. I imagine her taking three flat ice cream scoops from the top of a Ben and Jerry's pint. Then gouging down into the center like I do when I'm digging for a chunk of brownie.

I stare at the light's crystal iris. Now she has to cauterize everything. She twists her shoulders to angle the device and I jump out of my skin with pain. "Sorry sorry sorry," she says. "I'm so sorry. I was trying to get at something with the cauterizing device and my hand slipped." She lays a hand on my leg. I stare into the whiteness of the light and repeat the koan.

There is a less assured tone of voice coming from my doctor. Her words are sharper and she calls out commands—something about a clamp. The nurse seems confused and the doctor says the priority is getting another doctor into the room.

I don't faint and consider that a win. I repeat the koan: *Sun-faced Buddha,*

Moon-faced Buddha. I notice that the light is whiter on the edges.

Later that night, I tell my boyfriend what happened while he cooks dinner on my stove and I dull the pain with whisky. His eyes widen and he says he would have canceled Zen practice if he had known.
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The next morning, my boyfriend slowly walks me two blocks from my house to the doctor's office wearing his traditional monk's work clothing. I tease him that it looks like he's wearing pajamas. We talk about the prayer beads he carries while waiting for the nurse.

The doctor is cautious as she puts the speculum in to check that the stitches are holding. It hurts and I repeat the koan to myself trying not to cry. I imagine my cervix is a weeping red-black concave wound. She says it is swollen without saying if that's good or bad. She isn't sure about letting me go to an out-of-state wedding over the weekend and wants to see me tomorrow. Maybe the day after too.

Walking home, my boyfriend says he's been watching my face. "You told the nurse that the pain was a 7 out of 10," he says. "It hurt more than that." He might be right. I am more tired than I am admitting, but I want to go on this trip. Besides, what is the difference between a 7 or an 8? The pain doesn't feel like a number. It feels alternately dull and sharp, red and black.

I am exhausted when we get home and tuck a heating pad into my underwear. My boyfriend sleeps curled next to me.

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I do a video call with my family and try not to scare them. My doctor nicked an artery during the procedure. Cauterizing didn't stop the bleeding and so she had called in another doctor to put in stitches. They injected me with more medicine when the first dose wore off. One nurse ended up holding my hand to distract me from the pain. It had been a much bigger ordeal than expected.

My dad seems to not know what to say. My stepmother looks ashen. My brother says to "keep him in the loop."

There are parts I don't tell my family. That I knew the nurses were cleaning up surgical materials and pads without letting me see blood. That while I was putting my clothes back on I saw smears of blood they missed on the floor and procedure table. That at the end they made me drink apple juice and eat graham crackers so I was less shaky. That I was still repeating the koan as I was putting one foot then the other into my stretchy pants. That the curly haired doctor gave

me an entire bag of maternity pads and heat packs, tucking one into the front of my stretchy pants as if she were my mother.

My doctor sees me two more times. When she finally agrees to let me go on my trip, she says I have to listen to my best friend the doctor. She makes me promise not to lift anything, especially not into the overhead bin of the airplane. I promise. I am supposed to take a red-eye, but tiredly panic and rebook. My brother tells me I'm taking on too much. My boyfriend reminds me that my friends will successfully get married without me. My best friend promises to take care of me. The night before I leave, I dream about what I will do if no one helps me lift my bag on the plane.

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The wedding ceremony takes place under a tree in a park on a sunny day. At the reception, my brother and best friend take turns bringing me food and drink so I don't have to get up from the table. I chat with the groom's parents. They are older than mom was when she died. I dance to a song and wish I hadn't. I drink because it makes the pain less real.

We head to a bar after the reception and I watch my brother and best friend dance like siblings. I chat at the bar with a woman who runs a website for people with chronic pain. She is passionate and wears vintage glasses and I want to be her friend. I don't tell her about my procedure or the pain I'm in. I am embarrassed that my pain will go away.

The next morning over brunch at a noodle place I wince and my best friend notices. "You ok, honey?" I nod yes even though the pain is breaking through the four tablets of ibuprofen I took a couple of hours ago and the Sapporo isn't helping. Mom always preferred ibuprofen.

I go to the bathroom. It hurts like I imagine a dull, dark blue stomach punch would. In the toilet there is brown blood and ash, which they said might happen. I repeat the koan. I briefly contemplate taking the prescription pain meds my best friend tucked into her purse, but I am resolved not to. I'm not sure why.

After brunch, we become tourists in Chicago, taking selfies in front of the bean and listening to a sitar concert in Millennium Park. I finally ask if we can go—I probably should have said something an hour ago. The cab driver looks at me closely through his rearview mirror, asking if I'm okay as I slump into the back of his cab. I nod and repeat the koan. He drives us along the lake where the sun is circling bright and the horizon is blue meeting blue.

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I am getting better at not letting the pain bleed through the drugs because I have a schedule. Four tabs of ibuprofen and then a dose of Tylenol just before the first round wears off. It is important to time it just right or it will hurt. I watch

television and knit a sweater vest that will end up being too big. Mom believed crafts were therapeutic.

During a checkup last week, my curly-haired doctor brought a younger female doctor in to consult. I repeated the koan and tried not to cry as they adjusted the speculum to examine me. They decide that I have developed an infection. This explains the pain.

It does not explain the bleeding. A few days later, I wake at 2:30am, rolling over to find a black pool of blood the size of a serving platter under my hips. I am dizzy and grateful that my pajama pants are black so I don't have to see that bloodstain too. I go to the bathroom, bleed more and wake up looking at the trashcan, my vision rippling. I crawl to my computer in the living room, shaking on the floor and googling between bouts of light-headedness. I live two blocks from the hospital, but I can't stand up, much less walk or drive. It would be ridiculous to get an ambulance to drive me two blocks.

I am alone.

Do I wake up the doctor on call? Is this an emergency? Do I call someone I know and wake them? I loathe making people worry.

I wait until my vision stops waving, go upstairs, put a towel over the stain, change my pants, and crawl into bed. In the morning I leave a message at the doctor's office. Waiting for the return call, I soak the gray sheets and pajama pants in cold water that turns salmon. I wet a washcloth to soak up the brown stain on my bed and think of my mother stripping the wet bed sheets with her jaw set and her eyes tired. Or putting a cold cloth on my forehead in the bathroom after I threw up. Or coming home from work with saltines and ginger ale while I coughed on the couch.

"I'm sorry." the nurse says when she calls, "you have to go to the emergency room."

"It's close," I say, "I'll just walk."

"No dear, I'm sorry, but I can't have you walking to the emergency room. You either have to get someone to drive you or I can send an ambulance. But you can't walk. I can't have you passing out." Her tone doesn't allow argument.

I look out the front window and see my neighbor parking her car. Embarrassed, I ask if she can drive me to the emergency room. "Of course! Get in!" I text my boyfriend—he'll be there as soon as he can. I am relieved he will be with me.

He makes it to the ER lobby after I've sent a selfie to my family. My boyfriend tells me I'm an idiot for being tough about the pain. He tells me that I make my doctor's job harder when I don't ask for help. He says I should have texted him

when it happened because sometimes he's awake in the middle of the night. I am weak and trembly. It feels good to have someone worry.

My doctor is young and she has a long braid and a fleece vest. The nurse has blonde fluffy hair and a winding blue tattoo on her arm. She seems cool. There is no Goldfinger light. Instead, the stirrups fold out of the table like metal origami and the light is small and unobtrusive. The nurse hands a speculum to the doctor and they crowd between my legs and speak in medical patter. She tells me the stitches are hard to see, but they're still there.

The doctor orders a scan to see if I did anything to my head when I fell. They tell me to remove my earrings and I take too long, fumbling with the clasps. I lie on the track that moves me into the small opening for my head.

I don't cry or recite the koan. I look up at the white dome numb and blank.

This is the view my mom would have had if she had woken up from her coma. This was the test that told us the aneurysm was fatal. She would have seen this if she hadn't been brain dead.

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My brother, father, and I were waiting to talk to someone about donating mom's organs when he appeared, tall and confident in the doorway. A wide-eyed woman in a shorter white coat stood to his side. He strode into the room and introduced himself as the other neurosurgeon on his rounds. The woman next to him said nothing.

He said what we already knew, what the other neurosurgeon had said the night before: She is brain dead. The aneurysm bled into her brain and there was nowhere for it to go. The pressure pushed against her skull and killed her. "I'm sorry for your loss, but she didn't feel any pain."

Reflexively, I erupted: "That's not true. She was in a lot of pain. I was there." My chin jutted out. As if the doctor could gloss over what really happened. As if her death would hurt less because he could pretend that she "didn't feel any pain." As if his words could change the way things were.

The room was awkward and tense. Everyone was silent. The doctor cautiously spoke again but I wasn't listening. I stared ahead as he and the woman left.

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I have an appointment with my curly-haired doctor to follow up about the ER trip. She asks me to recall what happened the night I bled so much. When I say I looked online instead of calling the doctor on call, she winces but doesn't interrupt. The monk was right, I should have called someone.

While examining me, she chats about a conference I might be interested in. She is intelligent and warm. I like her and Mom would have liked her too. She mentions an article about Zen and says it made her think of my husband. I say he's my partner. The word feels strange and I mentally chastise myself; I should have said "boyfriend." She takes it in stride. He seems surprised she remembered him when I tell him later.

Sitting on the stool below me with her hands facing up, she says she can't explain why I fainted or bled so much. She has consulted with others and there's no good reason. "You're a medical mystery," she says.

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At the hospital, they offered me a chance to look at mom's brain scan and I said "No." No, I didn't want to see evidence of the blood pressing against her brain. No, I was not interested in seeing what killed her. No, I did not want to see what had caused her so much pain. No. No. No. They handed it to me on a CD instead.

I imagined my mother's head was a water balloon filled with liquid that had seeped from a blood vessel like a leaky hose. Except the skull isn't stretchy and the hose leaked too much and the red-black blood pooled until it pushed against the chalky white skull wall, creating pain. Pain we thought was just a headache. Pain she endured while I sat with a wet cloth against her forehead. Pain we waited for the ibuprofen to fix so we could go to the museum.

My best friend flew out when we knew mom wasn't going to make it. She fit into my family as usual, teasing my brother, distracting my nephews, and translating medical speak. She coaxed me into watching the scan a few days later, calmly putting the thin disc into my work computer, clicking to turn it into a medical device.

The slide show moved through each section of my mother's flooded brain. First a small white circular shape, then a wider ring of white with blobs—the orbs of her eyes. The inner material of her brain translated into discs, gray and black—mostly black.

"See there?" my best friend said, pausing the video and pointing at the screen where dark blobs were surrounded by the white circle of her skull. "That's really dark. It's not usually like that." She used her doctor voice. "She bled a lot, Beth. This is as bad as I've ever seen."

Later we go to the science museum to give my hyperactive nephews something to do and we walk past an exhibit on brains. I veer away before sobbing. My best friend notices and takes my hand.