

## Antiseptic System

“The pain you’re experiencing on your left side is caused by a paratubal cyst. There is also a questionable growth on your right tube,” says Dr. Yung. She keeps the sonogram wand steady on Lumen’s stomach, and points to the grainy image of what might be called a lump, or a smudge, on the screen.

“Have you experienced any pain on your right side?”

“No,” says Lumen. “Do I have to have surgery?” She almost clenches her hands but remembers the way Dr. Yung yelled at her when she flexed her legs. Lumen stays put, internally screaming.

“It’s unavoidable,” says Dr. Yung. “The cyst on your left side is too large to do a laparoscopy.” Dr. Yung snaps off the monitor. She hands Lumen a wad of rough paper towel.

“Your surgery is going to be scheduled for a couple days from now,” says Dr. Yung. She leaves the room.

There is nothing that Lumen can do except nod, and show up two days later in the operating room, in a gown.

The anesthesiologist places a mask over her face.

“Count down from ten,” he says.

Lumen doesn’t even get to nine before she slips under.

She wakes up in the recovery room. The first thing she feels is the shock of loud, hospital white, and then a line of pain, sweltering under her gown, right on her bikini line.

“I’ll get Dr. Yung,” says the nurse, checking her vitals. The young girl is swishing out of the curtain walls before Lumen gets a chance to say, “I hurt.”

Dr. Yung appears, reading a file that has Lumen's name printed on the front in a glossy, label-maker-made tag. She closes Lumen's file, and shoves it under her arms. When Dr. Yung clasps her hands in front of her, cold nervousness ices Lumen's gut.

"Am I infertile?" asks Lumen.

After pouring over every medical textbook in the Rosendale Library, Lumen knows the damage a cyst can do to her body, and she hates the time Dr. Yung spent looking at her file.

"Lumen, I'd like to invite you back for a checkup once you've healed."

"Why?"

"The left paratubal cyst measured 2.3 centimeters. The one on your right side measured 1.4 centimeters. These are unusually large cysts, and because of their former placement, I'd like to make sure that the cysts didn't cause any scarring on your fallopian tubes."

"You can't tell me now?" asks Lumen.

"Not until you've healed. If you could please come back in about two and a half weeks, I'll take a sonogram of the area again."

"And then what?" asks Lumen.

Dr. Yung says, "And then we'll go from there."

Lumen goes back to work in Rosendale a week later; a week and a half after that, just as Dr. Yung predicted, her incisions have healed. Lumen takes the stitches out herself with nail scissors. She knows she should go to a doctor to have them removed, but she can't bring herself to face that antiseptic smell.

Lumen spends weeks feeling mugged. Her choice to have children has been taken away from her. She is a biological bystander. An observer to the birth process, never a participant. What kind of woman does that makes her? She thinks of how her mother's biological history had

maybe warned her of this when Lumen was six, and twin willow trees were planted in their backyard for the loss of a brother and sister Lumen never knew. She had been too young to know the burial of the trees had been a warning to her, but she knows now, and wishes she could stop wishing.

Deep down, Lumen knows already that she is infertile. She knew something was wrong with her when she woke up in the middle of the night to a pain in her gut equivalent to heartbreak.

With the mad hope that she is wrong, Lumen finds herself sitting in the waiting room of Dr. Yung's office, four weeks after her surgery. Lumen scheduled an early appointment, thinking that she would be alone in the place she no longer feels welcome. Lumen was wrong. There is a woman sitting across from her, humming and drumming her fingers on the globe of her stomach. Lumen stares at her, wondering how a woman can be both monolithic and supple.

“Could I feel your stomach?” asks Lumen.

The woman stops humming. Her face breaks into a smile. “Of course.”

Lumen walks over, and places a hand on the woman's stomach. There is a heat that threatens to burn Lumen's fingertips. Her stomach is hard, solid, like Lumen could press and press, and the globe wouldn't collapse. There is warm, solid life living inside this woman, and Lumen feels cold in comparison. Lumen wishes she had seen that she wanted to experience pregnancy when she was younger, before her body expired. The thought of pregnancy always nipped at Lumen's periphery, but she always thought she could wait for the right time, the right partner, for the stars to align. But she had been wrong.

“Are you expecting?” asks the woman.

Lumen shook her head.

The woman looks sorry for her, as if she can read the disappointment in Lumen's wrinkled forehead.

"I'm sure it'll happen for you soon," says the woman.

Lumen is grateful when a nurse in baby pink scrubs calls her name, otherwise she would've walked out of the OB/GYN.

In the examining room, the nurse asks Lumen everything from how her day is going, to how many sexual partners she's had, to how her four inch incision has healed.

"I've healed fine, thank you," says Lumen.

"Fantastic," says the nurse. She snaps Lumen's file shut. "I'll send in Dr. Yung."

"Wonderful," says Lumen. Even though Dr. Yung is the reason Lumen is here, she is the last person Lumen wants to see. There is no way Dr. Yung is going to break this news gently; her way of conversation is surgical: a quick splice of interaction, then business, then a neat close. But another doctor might be less abrasive. Maybe Lumen should come back on a day Dr. Yung isn't on call.

Lumen likes the simplicity of the idea. She could sneak out right now, while she's alone. Lumen is slipping off the gynecologist's chair when Dr. Yung opens the door.

Even with the light flashing off her glasses, there is no mistaking that Dr. Yung is glaring at her. Lumen shifts herself back onto the chair.

"Nervous?" asks Dr. Yung.

"A little." If Lumen were older, had more salt between her joints, she would give Dr. Yung a piece of her mind. Of course she's nervous. She's been nervous for weeks now, and doesn't know how to be anything else. She spent twenty-six years getting to know herself through learning and self-teaching. What if all those growing pains and health classes became

useless? Lumen doesn't want to be anything else except a woman. But can she still identify with that title if Dr. Yung tells her she can't have children?

"Let's get started," says Dr. Yung. She turns off the lights, and turns on the sonogram machine.

Lumen feels as though she's being thrown into being a test subject, but she leans back, and rolls up her shirt. She can see her heart pulsing, knocking against the rungs of her ribs. Dr. Yung squirts the gel on her stomach. The dry sides of Lumen's throat smack together. Lumen settles herself into the chair, with her head turned towards the screen.

Dr. Yung shifts the wand, spreading the gel. The computer monitor is full of scratchy images that still make no sense to Lumen. Dr. Yung stops the wand, and points to two spots on the screen. Her fingernails are painted the dusty color of moth wings.

"See the webbing in your fallopian tubes?"

"Yes." Lumen doesn't; all she sees is a violent clustering of black and white scratches, but she knows that she's seconds away from confirming what she already knows to be true.

"The webbing is telling of scarring in your fallopian tubes. It's not incredibly thick, but it is pretty significant, possibly enough to block both of them."

"What does that mean?"

"Your chances of being fertile are significantly reduced when there's this amount of scarring. I don't want to say it's impossible, but the chances aren't high."

Lumen looks at the screen, furrows her brows, squints her eyes, turns her head to the side. Still, she sees only knit slashes of black and white. None of these shifting images look like her insides. Lumen is not convinced that this scarred reproductive system is her own. Dr. Yung has made a mistake.

“I’d like a second opinion,” says Lumen. “Do you recommend anyone?”

“If you’d like, schedule an appointment with my colleague, Dr. Ramses.”

The soft spot at the back of Lumen’s throat tightens. Dr. Yung doesn’t notice Lumen’s eyes getting wet. She is too busy scribbling in Lumen’s file. She is probably crossing out Lumen’s name, and writing ‘INFERTILE’ in bold, black-out letters.

“You’re being insensitive,” says Lumen.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

Lumen looks up at the ceiling, filtering the tears to the backs of her eyes. If she doesn’t distract herself, she’s going to cry, and that’s the last thing she wants.

“You’re not sorry,” says Lumen.

The tendons in Dr. Yung’s neck flex. It is the first human response Lumen has seen from her.

Dr. Yung plants herself against the counter. She stands with her hands clasped, the way she did when she delivered Lumen’s first bit of bad news.

“There is nothing anyone can do.”

“Your delivery--”

“Is professional,” says Dr. Yung.

“There’s really nothing that can be done?”

“No,” says Dr. Yung. “Scars don’t fade.”

“What kind of woman does this make me?” Lumen asks because Dr. Yung is the only one in the room the hear her.

“I can’t answer that,” says Dr. Yung. “But I know you will need continue to come to the OB/GYN for checkups, in case you have any more complications.”

Lumen looks around her, wondering why she is still sitting here. There is nothing more than she can gain from this visit. She needs to leave, to go back home and rehash this doctor's visit until it makes some form of sense in her mind.

"Thank you for your time, Dr. Yung," says Lumen. She stands, and passes Dr. Yung a smile--the kind she gives cashiers at grocery stores. Lumen isn't going to apologize, though she feels they should part on good terms. It isn't pride that glues her mouth shut; it's shame. She's gone too far to retreat.

Without the fanfare of a returned smile, Dr. Yung unclasps her hands. She holds out a hand to Lumen.

Dr. Yung's hand is smooth, and cold from too much soap and water. There is nothing extravagant about her hand, no wedding ring. Dr. Yung takes care of her hands; Lumen is grateful that she does.

Dr. Yung leaves Lumen in the examining room. Her perfume lingers. It is the smell of rubbing alcohol.