



FIRST PERSON //
My Body, Myself

■ BY MEERA LEE SETHI

When your father is a doctor and your mother is a nurse, it can be difficult to keep your body to yourself. From the start, their trained eyes and hands peered and poked at me when my body burned, bled, shivered, stung, ached. For the first two decades of my life, no sore belly or prickly hive went unexamined by one parent or the other. If they couldn't treat it themselves, they would sit with me through my appointments like guardians of my very being. They were hardly aware of the demurrals I made—which were faint, because by the time I was old enough to be abashed, I also understood how deeply protest

would hurt them. I packaged up my longing for self-rule and kept it in the back of my throat, where it sat and quietly itched. I'd be free of them soon enough.

And then I was. I had traveled 9,000 miles from Singapore to the United States to attend college in Boston, and now I was alone in a nurse practitioner's office in the campus health clinic, receiving the first medical news of import in my life. "The results of your pap smear were abnormal," I was told. "They're consistent with the presence of HPV, a sexually transmitted infection that can lead to cancer. You'll need a biopsy."

A biopsy. Cancer. My father isn't just a physician, he's an oncologist. Mention of cancer had seeped easily into almost every dinnertime conversation. Sometimes it seemed as if the whole world had been pinched by its claws. I also knew cancer as a killer: brutal, unpredictable, indifferent. I thought of

the strange insurgent cells I had given up, now thinly daubed onto glass. By their very shape, they relayed a threat.

The next week, I lay as flat as I could and expelled the air from my lungs as a doctor removed a tiny cone of tissue from my cervix. More substantial than the mere scrape of cells that had been taken, it would help to determine an exact diagnosis and rule out the worst possibility, that malignancy was growing strong in me. The results of the biopsy confirmed what had been seen before: I had low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesions, otherwise known as mild dysplasia, otherwise known as, *your cells look pretty weird but not weird enough to kill you—yet.*

"What now?" I wanted to know. I was used to someone taking charge. "Well, we'll just keep testing you. The abnormality may worsen, in which case there are treatments we can talk about, or it may disappear altogether. In the best scenario, the body resolves these things on its own."

What I heard was: You're on your own. I felt a pang. Would my body resolve its abnormality? Was it strong enough, determined enough? Did it even know how?

Fumblingly, I did my best to help it. I gave up cigarettes. I tried to eat better so that my body would have all the ammunition it needed to curb its own latent rebellion. I turned my will inward, urging my cells to behave. And every three months for the next year and a half, I returned to the hospital and relinquished more of myself for testing.

During all that time, I never said a word to either of my parents. They would have been fierce and solicitous allies, but once again I felt that silent itch at the back of my throat. In the years away from home, I'd felt my flesh grow solid around my bones—and with it my own sense of fortitude. Sharing this news now would have begun an exchange I did not want to have: their advice sailing toward me, my body sailing back across the seas. Instead, I held it close. Disordered and imperfect as my body was, it was solely my responsibility now.

I hoped with every doctor's appointment that this would be the day my body declared it had righted itself. At last, it did. I was about to graduate when the report arrived telling me that the results of my latest pap smear had been normal. Every last trace of the lesions had evaporated. Relief, of course—but also an absurd sense of pride. We'd done it together, my cells and I. We'd figured it out. ■

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