

## *Teratoma*

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I found a lump in my breast.

I first noticed it there while I masturbated in the shower, a jarring interruption to the ongoing interruption of my morning routine which would have gotten me to work on time. Sick with nervousness I called in to work, water still running, peaking out from the shower curtain. Immediately, I curled up in the bed, sopping wet. I called my mother after, processing the rage and grief I felt by screaming over my mother's worried questions and the sounds of the shower in the other room. It was something I had been dreading since I first learned of my grandmother's mastectomy while swimming with her as a child — since she had passed away.

I called my Doctor right after, at my mother's instruction. I was slightly calmer, then, and was able to get an appointment four days later. I called in sick the next three days, too.

The next day, after I told my friends how much meant to me in a series of cryptic text messages, I called my mom back to apologize. I tried to end the call with a final goodbye, as if I would drop dead the moment I hung up. She interrupted me, letting me know it would all be alright.

During the two days after that, I almost made myself believe her. The day I returned to work, a Friday, I managed to craft myself an outfit from the dirty clothes gathered around the edges of my laundry basket and a hand-me-down flannel from my ex-boyfriend. His scent clung to the barely-washed fabric of the patterned button-up in a way that was warm, and comforting, and kept me from crying in my cubicle.

On Saturday was the doctor's appointment. Cancellations are always more frequent on weekends. My mother accompanied me, sitting on one of those uncomfortable chairs they have for worried family members. I had slept in the button up from the day before, and I methodically unbuttoned it at his request. The doctor examined my breasts. There was a reassurance that came with his gloved hand prodding at the contours of my left boob. He spoke to my mother of the things to come. I couldn't bring myself to listen, instead imagining the left side of my chest flat, like my grandmother's. I imagined it as a ghost-thing — already gone before the surgery, but whose presence would haunt me after its excision.

The next weeks I barely remember. A small battery of tests were quickly scheduled after the initial doctor's appointment. I could not yet bring myself to even think about chemo.

Quickly, my mom had moved into my apartment, taking time off work to take care of me.

Soon I did too.

I quickly became numb, there at home. I would sit on the couch under a blanket, watching Netflix as a small pile of food and medication bottles would accumulate around me. I'd go to bed late. When I would wake in the afternoon, she'd hold my hand, walking me to the shower. She never made me wear more than a pair of underwear in her presence. Sometimes, less than that. Sometimes I'd wake up with a = stuffed animal tucked beside me on the couch.

Finally, the biopsy results came back. **Non-malignant.** I don't remember how I felt in that moment of reading the letter. But I do remember what came after. I threw a dinner party with all the friends that had been texting me with no replies for weeks. I cried in my mother's arms. I almost let myself forget what had come before.

It was following my mother's departure back to her own home that I came to truly understand the thing growing within me.

I was nude, wearing just a crop top, and I had just peed in the shower while washing my hair. The water which I had declined to pat off with a musty towel still clung to my body in

places and dripped from the dark body hair that I had not trimmed in over a month. My head still rung with echoes of the evening before.

It was early in the morning then. The witching hour. With an electric toothbrush half hanging out of my mouth and toothpaste dribbling down my chin, I slipped a hand beneath my shirt, Feeling the lump, as had long become routine. I monitored it for texture, firmness, and any changes which may have occurred. All at once I realized, *I don't have to do this anymore*. Relief washed over me. It would soon be gone, a routine excision in a month or so and I could truly leave the matter behind me.

That's when it began to wriggle.

I pulled my hand away, letting my toothbrush hit the basin of the sink with a crack. For a moment the small circular brush still spun, pressed up against the stainless steel. I found myself breathing heavily, gasping. I knew it to be an effect of the alcohol, or my lack of sleep.

Just as I began to convince myself it was nothing it started spasming in tight bursts on the underside of my breasts. The pain was stinging, like a son kicking at the walls of his enclosure. It felt like the thing inside of me would kick through my chest. .

On instinct I grabbed it, and I squeezed. I dug my fingernails deep into the underside of the lump and squeezed it like an inflamed cyst. I tried to kill it. I tugged on the string fitted to the bulb of the kitchen lamp, its yellow incandescence clearing a way through the mess within the drawer.

Knife. Handle. Fist.

I held the tip of the blade to my chest before I even knew what I was doing. In a moment of bodily clarity I had come to understand. I wanted it out.

I breathed. In and out. I set the knife gently beside my toothbrush in the sink. I had to breathe, I had to think. Logically. I had to find some reason why this thing was moving within me, why an inert clump of my own cells were moving on their own. I touched it now, gently. Pushing and prodding it, shifting it from where it had been positioned on my boob. It slid, as if my skin was merely some wet membrane separating this thing, which rested on the fat of my chest, within me from the outside. It was slow at first, like pushing a stone through particularly thick gelatin. But as I moved it back and forth, it loosened.

My panic was dull, blanketed by a warm sense of acceptance as it began to travel on its own. The thing crept up and around the curvature of my breast. It moved up to my shoulder. Even slower now, it shifted up my clavicle, nearing my neck, the small thing unphased by my clawing fingers as I attempted to push it back. In the dim light I could see it, red and inflamed, a small, writhing bump.

Something filled my throat. I coughed and coughed and couldn't dislodge what had filled my esophagus. I gripped the countertop. My eyes hurt. I didn't have my phone. I knew my mom could help. *If she was here she could help.* My legs were weak. *I need my mom.* I didn't have my phone. I could feel myself crying. *No. Not after all this.*

And finally, I could breathe. I could taste stomach acid at the back of my throat as I leaned over the steel basin, coughing, my burning eyes squeezed shut as I cried.

Something landed in the sink with a squelching thud. When I had finally wiped the tears and burning sting from my eyes I saw there, incarnadine. The thing that had been growing inside of me.

It was at the bottom of the sink, a small round mass within a splatter tinting the steel basin. It was red, and coated in the same blood that stained my nighttime crop-top. I picked it up, and wiped off the blood with my thumb to get a closer look. It was smooth, and coarse, and rough with newly growing hair. There were two slits on the sides of ovular mass, both unequal in elevation. There were two small holes like a nose, and two vaguely horizontal ridges resembling lips beneath it.

I felt my breast beneath my soaking top. The lump was gone. I cradled the thing in my hands. I laughed at the absurdity of the situation. And then, as if to mock me, it opened its eyes.

I threw it back into the sink without hesitation. At first, one shot open, flesh opening to reveal a milky-pink sclera where there had before been only a small ridge. The thing's eye twitched. Slowly the eye rolled over, a searing blue iris without pupils meeting my horrified gaze. I was petrified, and it was only as the second opened and turned to greet me that I found myself able to flip the switch to the garbage disposal.

The tumour churned in the spinning blades, not yet caught but still spilling blood and chunks of flesh throughout the sink. I grabbed my broken electric toothbrush and slammed

the base of it into the “face” of the misshapen thing that had grown within me. Shards of flesh and plastic flew. It made a strange, high pitched hum as it died. A thick, mucosal liquid gathered at its eyes and ran down into the bloody sink.

Finally, I was rid of it. Finally, I was free.

I remember little after that, save for waking to my mother pounding on the door. It had been days since I had responded to her text messages, days since I had been awake. From her accounts I was curled up halfway on the couch, sleeping peacefully. When we got to the hospital there was no medical indication of anything being wrong with me. No trace of my recent tumour tribulations – either physically or within the medical system. Groggy and exhausted, I remember laying there in that hospital bed, listening to my mother’s protests to the team of doctors and nurses attending to me, clearly still unwell. Every test came back clean. Eventually, my mother’s protesting turned to bargaining. And then, nothing.

I was discharged soon after that.

It's October now. Many years have passed since then. It's strange, the thought of that thing growing within me brings with it a sense of warmth at the edges of the lingering trauma. My mother moved across the country soon after that. I didn't see her again before she passed.

I don't regret killing that horrid thing. Though in a way, I'm still glad I get to see him from time to time.

It first started in the hospital, when finally I could summon the strength to get up and pee on my own. Someone had left the tap on in the washroom, and when I went to wash my hands it was there in the sink, looking up with the bigger of its two bloodshot eyes. I washed my hands, the running water flowing onto it alongside soap suds and dirt from under my fingernails.

There was no garbage disposal, so I wiped my hands on a paper towel and left.

I'll see his little red form in the reflections of puddles in the rain or far off in the distance atop the surface of a flowing riverbed, when I go on a hike. There'll be a little red speck on the horizon, slowly moving closer, no matter the direction of the flow of water. It is then when I know it is my time to leave.

Some nights, when the moon is full; the craters and ridges in the night sky line up with my hazy memories of those lumps of flesh and stubble-hair in the basin of my sink.