In my first 20 years of menstruating, I had a very regular, and timely period that would last 4-5 days. In fact, I often found it kind of neat that I would often get my period around the full moon. The only "negative" symptoms I experienced was increased irritability for two days before I would bleed and some painful cramps every 2-4 months. In fact, I was proud to say that it was a perfectly normal period, thank you very much.

The last thing I expected was a change not too long into my 21st year of menstruating. After the usual 4-5 days of regular bleeding, I began to have spotting for 3-4 days after. Every couple months, the days of spotting seemed to increase by an additional day. I did google searches and worried that perhaps I could be experiencing my "change of life" early. I also thought it could be nothing because as many women throughout my life have remarked, "Bodies are weird, and periods are weird." So, because nothing seemed easier to deal with, I chalked it up to perhaps just a weird change.

However, after about seven months of this irregular bleeding I started to notice that I was getting cramps more often, felt bloated for longer, and more fatigued. I realized it was finally time to bring this issue to my primary care provider and see what she thought. I went in, put my feet in those cold stirrups and was told that everything looked good but that she would order an ultrasound, "just in case." This was my second time having an ultrasound. The first time I had one done was on my legs. At my next appointment, the technician roamed the cold and slimy transducer over my abdomen. I asked her if she saw anything, just as I had during my leg ultrasound a year before. She told me that while she has the ability to identify anything out of the ordinary so she knows where to move the transducer, she cannot share that information with patients. I immediately felt a pang of anxiety. This was not the response I had received from the technician last year. I was told the doctor would call me when my results were reviewed.

A few days later, I received an email notifying me that my results were available. Thinking that I would receive a call from my doctor soon I went to look and was startled to learn I had a cyst or mass on each ovary. It was also reported that one appeared to be bigger than the other. I immediately spiraled. What does this mean? A quick google search told me they could be functional but they could also mean something worse. It took nearly a week and a half for a provider to get in touch with me. They didn't think it was anything to worry about but we would do another ultrasound in three months to see if there is any growth and go from there. In those three months my spotting had increased to a point where I was bleeding every day, my cramps increased, and I noticed a change in my bowel movements. To which I then sought medical attention for that last change.

Finally, I went in for my second ultrasound. At this point though, I changed my medical notifications so I would not receive results without a provider talking to me about them. A day later, I received a call. The mass had grown by two centimeters and a CT scan would be required. I was also getting tests to address my other symptoms and it wasn't pleasant. The CT

scan results a month later indicated that the mass had grown another two centimeters and I was referred to a gynecologist. She told me she wasn't sure what these were and wanted to refer me to a specialist who was a man in Fargo and that the next step would be a hysteroscopy that is "minimally invasive." A male gynecologist in a state that does not provide full access to reproductive health was an immediate no for me and I shared that concern with her. She said she would just send a copy of the scan and that I could make a decision later about a referral. She left the room and I quickly started googling what a hysteroscopy is. I learned it was a procedure where a thin tube with a camera is inserted to your uterus. Well, that sounds pretty invasive to me. She came back into the room and I shared my concerns about this not seeming like a minimally invasive procedure. Many friends of mine have shared with me through the years how painful having an IUD inserted was and how they wished they could have received anesthesia or stronger pain medication to treat it after. It was a big reason why I never pursued that form of birth control. The doctor pushed back and minimized my concerns. The next day I asked to be referred to another gynecologist and one that has more experience with cysts or masses.

In my first appointment with my new gynecologist she, like the other doctor, told me right away that the mass looks complex. However, she had some new and startling information, she said it needs to be removed. Due to its complex nature, she wanted to order blood work to see if there is a potential for it being cancerous. This needed to be identified right away because if it was, I would need to seek care at a facility that has a gynecological oncologist. Boom, boom, boom, each new piece of information she shared with me hit fast and hard. I took deep breaths to steady myself and focus on the information she was giving me. Even though each new piece of information she shared was shocking--I genuinely appreciated her direct yet kind approach. She went on to explain that even if the test comes back positive, it doesn't always mean cancer and that endometriosis also triggers a positive test. Having friends who have talked about the pain of endometriosis and the unpredictable periods for most of their mentrstating life, this did not seem like a likely scenario for myself and told her as much. The same comment that I have exchanged with women through most of my life came up again, "Bodies are weird, periods are weird. Everyone is different."

She also brought up that a hysteroscopy would be required before the mass can be removed. Again, I found myself sharing my concerns about the procedure. While it was again brought up that in most cases, this isn't a painful procedure, she honored my concerns and said it would be no problem to reserve an operating room for it. I then asked for a timeline of when I might need to have this mass removed--the soonest timeline might possibly be in two months. Great, it was looking like December then.

In a weird twist of fate, the only time I could get my operational hysteroscopy scheduled was the day after my colonoscopy. The colonoscopy was needed to address the recent change I had been experiencing in my bowel movements. My new gynecologist had said that it was possible that this change could be due to the mass pressing against my colon but that it was good that I was getting it looked at. After going 15 years without needing any procedures that require anesthesia-- I was scheduled to have it two days in a row and according to the estimated

timeline of needing to get the mass removed-- possibly three times in one month. As someone who has been very fortunate to not experience any serious health events, I couldn't believe this was happening. As the old adage goes, "When it rains, it pours."

I soon received the results of my blood work, my heart dropped. It was positive. While the count was low, it was still a risk so I had to begin the work of identifying a doctor and a facility. Luckily, a friend of mine's spouse is a lawyer who works at a firm that has taken on many medical malpractice cases. I was able to provide the names of doctors after receiving a recommendation from my gynecologist that the University of Minnesota Masonic Cancer Center would be a good choice if my preference is to stay in Minnesota. I quickly found a gynecological oncologist whose professional background looked good and got a pre-op appointment scheduled for a week before my two minor operating procedures.

Driving the nearly four hours down to the cities that day was an emotional rollercoaster as it was the day after the election. I couldn't stop thinking about what the re-election of Donald Trump would mean for reproductive healthcare at a time when my own reproductive health was on the fritz. I thought about my friend who had recently shared that her and her partner were going to start looking into trying for a baby. I thought about my own feelings about whether or not I wanted children. I have always thought that if I was meant to have kids--it would strike me as suddenly as lightning and I would be filled with clarity. However, that clarifying lightening still hasn't struck as I continued to watch the road onh my drive. I still wasn't sure, but with these election results, that feeling of possibly wanting a child was slipping further and further away.

That night, I stayed with a friend of mine who, just a year earlier, had a cyst removed from one of her ovaries. There was no risk of cancer in her case but I remembered consoling her at a holiday party as she was naturally worried about it. As I sat in her living room sharing my various concerns she reciprocated the care I gave her just 11 months earlier. She then asked me what my plan was post surgery as she recalled being in a lot of pain following her. I told her I wasn't sure. She then offered that I stay with her after my surgery before traveling back home as the drive would likely be hard on my body and that she lives 10 mins from the hospital so we could quickly get me care in case any unexpected complications pop up. My eyes welled with tears as I thanked her for taking this burden off of me that I hadn't even thought of yet. While the world and my own personal health felt very daunting--I couldn't help but be grateful for the amazing women in my life.

My pre-op appointment was early the next morning. Every time I saw the word "cancer", I felt a pit in my stomach. I quickly checked in and shortly after was guided to an office by a nurse. When the doctor came in she sat down, got logged into her computer and turned to me.

"I reviewed your scans and blood work. This is a very complex looking mass." She paused. I prepared myself. "I do not see a scenario where we can remove this mass without also removing the ovary it is attached to." She paused again. "Additionally, if we do find cancer, we will need to perform a whole hysterectomy. Are you familiar with what that is?" I nodded. The

reality of my choice of whether or not to have children possibly being taken away from me was hitting me hard. While having children has never been a goal or strong desire of mine for as long as I can remember. Even in this moment, my choice possibly being taken from me was more upsetting than the idea of never having children. Great, more lack of clarity. Finally I spoke, " It's my understanding that if that were to happen, it would trigger menopause. Is that correct?"

"Yes." She responded. "You can take some time to decide but there are options. The first option is that with your permission, while you are under and if there is cancer, we would remove it right away. The second option is that we remove the left ovary to complete the procedure and if there is cancer, we would discuss that with you after you wake and could make a decision at a later date."

I took a moment then, waiting one more time to see if that lightning bolt of clarity was going to suddenly strike-- but the only thing I felt was a desire to not have to schedule a fourth surgery within the span of two months.

"Let's get it all taken care of in one go if possible. If there is cancer, then it's not worth giving it more time to grow." We looked at the calendar and identified a timeframe of early December to schedule the operation.

After my appointment I got together with my closest group of girlfriends. We all met each other through previous political work and had been friends spanning about 8 to 13 years. We commiserated over the results of the national election and theororized on what a potential tie in the Minnesota House of Representatives might look like. After catching up on all the election news, I braced myself to share my updated health news. We cried together, hugged and was assured that they would all be there for me. It is truly amazing how much lighter the burden of your fear feels when you allow others to help you take that on.

The next four and a half weeks were filled with a lot of anxiety. I had my back to back minor operating procedures of a hysteroscopy and a colonoscopy. I was now bleeding everyday and my abdominal cramps increased in frequency and in intensity. In my pre-op appointment the week before, I learned that in the best case scenario--I would need at least two weeks to recover. In the worst case, I would need six weeks to recover. Luckily my job in December is pretty low-pressure. However, my biggest yearly work project happens every February so as soon as that new year hits--it gets intense. The idea of possibly still needing to recover well into the new year was unsettling so I tried my best to focus on work projects that would put me in the best position in the event I would need six weeks of recovery time.

At the end of the first week of December, I traveled with my husband down to the twin cities. The timing was honestly perfect because two days before my operation a friend of mine was hosting a housewarming/holiday party. I was incredibly grateful for the opportunity to spend an evening so close to my surgery with my closest and dearest friends. I love the holidays, it has always been a time where I can reflect on the year, show my loved ones how much they mean to me, and look towards what the next year will bring. I didn't know what was coming next for

me. Everything in the last year had felt so focused on identifying what was going on in my body and not knowing what the outcome of my surgery was going to be made me feel like there was a hazy cloud blocking my view of what was to come. Realizing that I had become too lost in my thoughts, I made another gin & jam and decided to stay present with a group of people who have shaped various aspects of my life.

Two days later, I woke up at 3:30 a.m. to begin preparing for my 5:30 a.m. surgery. I scrubbed down with the antibacterial soap the doctors had given me. Meticulously following their instructions of using the entire bottle, it smells like a hospital. After I washed up I donned the comfortable clothing that had taken longer than I should have to pick out a few days ago. I grabbed my suitcase filled with books, my nintendo switch, and more clothing that took too long to pick out to stay entertained for a week while I stayed with my friend in recovery and we were off.

I was surprised by how many people were there at 4:45 a.m. We checked in and proceeded to be herded to different waiting rooms around the hospital. After weeks of anxiety I was surprised to find myself in an eerie state of calm. I was finally here-- after almost a year of growing disquiet about my abnormal menstrual bleeding getting longer and longer each month, unprecedented amounts of fatigue, and increased pain and unpredictability with my periods-- they were going to address the problem. I heard my name called, surprised they pronounced it right, a good sign. I hugged my husband and followed the nurse to the pre-op room.

Once there, the nurse provided me with a hospital gown and grippy socks along with some privacy. I quickly dawned them and assumed my position on the hospital bed. I looked down at my hands and realized with delight that my nails matched my hospital gown. I snapped a quick selfie and sent it to my friends and mom adding the message, "Oh thank GOD my nails match my gown. I would have been SO EMBARRASSED if it clashed. What would the doctors have said?" I knew that there was only one person in the whole world who would be awake to answer my message right away. A text notification from Mom. I opened and she had sent a voice note and my mother's voice poured into the hospital room, "I adore you my little one, I just love you." My eyes were shrink-wrapped with tears when the nurse came back in with more people to grab blood samples along with my husband.

After multiple pokes and confirmations of what medications I was on my gynecological oncologist and her team came in. She walked me through what was going to happen again and what steps she would be taking if cancer was found and if cancer wasn't found. I know I asked some questions and repeated a reworked version of a joke about my nails matching the hospital gown but it's hard to remember these moments before now as shortly after the conversation they hooked me to the anesthetic.

Suddenly I woke up. My throat felt dry and I was in a lot of pain but I also felt disconnected. I could feel the tears welling in my eyes. Great, this was now the third time I've woken up from anesthesia crying. The first time was after my colonoscopy not three weeks ago. But then, I awoke to a voice that had an accent similar to my mothers. I remember asking if she was around at that time. I wondered if she was here now and looked to the voice coming from my left. No, it's a nurse, just like last time.

"I have ice for you dear. Do you want me to get your husband?" The nurse asks. I open my hand and nod my head. I raise the plastic cup to my mouth, chew on some ice. A thought comes rearing into my frontal lobe, "Do I still have my uterus?" and immediately fell back asleep.

When I wake up again I'm in a different, brighter room. My husband is sitting to my left and my gynecological oncologist is talking to me. How long have I been asleep? I try to keep my eyes open and then she says, "Things went even better than expected. We were able to remove the cyst and ovary with minimal cuts. There was no cancer and--" relieved to hear that I still had my uterus and ovary and that the cyst was removed I let my eyes fall closed again and slept.

The next time I wake up I immediately feel hungry but mixed with pain. Am I hungry or am I in pain? I look to my left and my husband smiles and hands me a plastic up of ice water. "Chew the ice, then drink the water. The nurse was just here to check on you but you were still out." I nod my head in understanding and chew the ice then let the cold water ease the dryness in my throat. "What time is it?" I croak out. I don't recognize my voice. "It's 3:00 p.m." He answers and I am slightly shocked to hear that I have been asleep for almost 10 hours. "I think I'm hungry." I whisper and try to sit up but it hurts too much so I slump back down. Noticing the pain on my face my husband says he will find the nurse and tell her to bring some food. Not a minute goes by and my husband returns with the nurse. I suddenly realized that this is not the same nurse who was by my bed immediately following my surgery. I recalled that nurse telling me that a different nurse would be with me when I'm moved to the post-op room and that she was "really great." This new, younger blonde nurse comes to my bed. "I hear you're hungry. Let's get you sitting up." She pushes the button that lifts the bed along with my torso. There is less pain with this method of getting upright but pain is still there as I try to adjust my body to accommodate the moving bed. "I have applesauce and ice cream. What would you like?" She says curtly. Something about her kind of bothers me. This is the first person I have come across during my time at this hospital that rubs me the wrong way. "I was told at some point that there would be toast?" I muster out, still accommodating to the weird way using my voice feels connected to my abdomen. Has that always been the case? "We are out of toast." She says with a frown. "Oh, well just bring what you have." I respond looking toward my bag of stuff in the corner suddenly remembering that my husband had bought me chocolates and Old Dutch dill pickle chips as a treat. She leaves and I ask my husband to bring the chocolates, chips, and my phone. He obligues and I immediately ripped into the bag of chips. The delicious smell of dill fills the area and I sigh in excitement as my husband crinkles his nose. He has never liked the smell of these chips but he knows how much I enjoy them. I immediately dig into them. Mid-bite the nurse comes back holding what looks like a sandwich in her hand. "I found a turkey sandwich for you!"

She smiles and puts the sandwich on the tray next to me along with some applesauce. Maybe she isn't so bad after all.

As I eat, my husband goes over what the doctor told him about my surgery. He tells me the part I remember, about it going well and that there was no cancer. He then asks if I remember her telling me the diagnosis. "What diagnosis?" I ask, this must have been when I fell asleep. "The doctor said she would come back later once you were more alert and tell you more about it." He says, watching me eat with slight relief on his face. "Can you just tell me now?" He hesitates slightly but then offers, "Well, I don't want to get this wrong but she said you have endometriosis." I pause, because again I am confronted with the universal truth that, "Bodies are weird, periods are weird and everyone is different."

After finishing my sandwich, applesauce, and about 1/8 of the large bag of chips with a surprising amount of speed and vigor, I pick up my phone. The lock screen is filled with notifications and I begin to make my way through the various texts of well wishes, laughing emojis at my nails matching my gown joke, and a particularly hilarious message from a friend in the style of those dirty text chain messages you might receive around the holidays or big events. You know the ones, they are filled with double entendres followed by corresponding emojis. This one was tailored to me and my surgery and I can't help but laugh despite how much pain it causes. Typically, I am the person sharing the dirty text chain which is usually met with messages from my friends of "ugh whyyyy" and "NOT ANOTHER ONE" and "I hate how much I like these, never stop sending them." As I re-read the text, in that moment, I know that I am " 💌 the baddest 😎 girl 👧 in the 📍 218 🌎" and that "A ho 👠 is never ❌ cold 🥶 and a ho 💃 heals 💊 quick ⚡" because "[my] 👭 whole squad 👭 tough 💪 as 🤬 f*ck 🤬 and we all 👊 fight 🥊 too ✌"