

How I Lost My Uterus and Found My Voice

A Memoir of Love, Hope, and Empowerment



Michelle L. Whitlock

Edited by Erin Essenmacher
Cover Photo by Tracy Friend

iUniverse, Inc.
Bloomington

How I Lost My Uterus and Found My Voice
A Memoir of Love, Hope, and Empowerment

Copyright © 2012 Michelle L. Whitlock

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

The information, ideas, and suggestions in this book are not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice. Before following any suggestions contained in this book, you should consult your personal physician. Neither the author nor the publisher shall be liable or responsible for any loss or damage allegedly arising as a consequence of your use or application of any information or suggestions in this book.

iUniverse books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

iUniverse
1663 Liberty Drive
Bloomington, IN 47403
www.iuniverse.com
1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any Web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher, and the publisher hereby disclaims any responsibility for them.

Any people depicted in stock imagery provided by Thinkstock are models, and such images are being used for illustrative purposes only.

Certain stock imagery © Thinkstock.

ISBN: 978-1-4620-7056-5 (sc)
ISBN: 978-1-4620-7057-2 (hc)
ISBN: 978-1-4620-7058-9 (e)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011961645

Printed in the United States of America

iUniverse rev. date: 2/28/2012

For my girls:
Riley Grier
Shelby-Kay
Cassidy Sommerlyn
Anna Grace
Emalee Michelle
Amy Jo

*There's a long, long trail a-winding
Into the land of my dreams
Where the nightingales are singing
And a white moon beams:
There's a long, long night of waiting
Until my dreams all come true;
Till the day when I'll be going down
That long, long trail with you.*

—Stoddard King
(Sung as a lullaby to me by my grandma)

Contents

Introduction	xv
Part 1. The Pivotal Week	1
Turning Point <i>April 2004</i>	2
Part 2. Everything Before	11
Initiation <i>Fall 1992</i>	12
Chance Encounter <i>June 2001</i>	19
Fireworks <i>July 2001</i>	30
Feminine Itch <i>July 2001</i>	34
Magic Words <i>August 2001</i>	37
Trouble on the Horizon <i>October to November 2001</i>	41
The Breakup <i>December 2001</i>	47
Results <i>December 2001</i>	50

The Getaway <i>December 2001</i>	56
Reality <i>December 2001 to January 2002</i>	60
Research <i>January 2002</i>	65
Options <i>January 2002</i>	70
Surgery <i>February 2002</i>	75
Healing <i>March 2002 to May 2003</i>	80
Part 3. Everything After	85
The Morning After <i>April 2004</i>	86
Coping <i>May 2004</i>	91
Maybe Babies <i>May to June 2004</i>	96
Jamaican Wedding <i>June 2004</i>	105
Dreaded Surgery <i>June 2004</i>	115

Another Crack	122
<i>July 2004</i>	
Decisions	125
<i>July 2004</i>	
(Another) Health Insurance Nightmare	128
<i>July 2004</i>	
Heavy Artillery	130
<i>August to September 2004</i>	
Aftermath	144
<i>September to December 2004</i>	
New Beginnings	151
<i>Winter to summer 2005</i>	
Reclaiming My Sexuality	157
<i>Fall 2005 to spring 2006</i>	
Two-Year Checkup, Round Two	159
<i>August 2006</i>	
Finding My Voice	163
<i>Late 2006 to early 2007</i>	
Prayers	166
<i>Spring 2007</i>	
Epilogue	169
HPV and Cervical Cancer Facts	173
Tips to My Girlfriends	177
Resource Directory	181

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As this is a work of non-fiction, I have recreated the conversations to the best of my ability, using my memory, personal notes, journals, medical charts, and interviews with loved ones. With their permissions, I have chosen not to change most of the people's names, due to the deep and personal relationships I have with them. One exception is medical personnel, whom I shall refer to with only a single letter out of respect for their privacy and practices.

To Mark: my husband, best friend, lover, and angel. Thank you for sharing this life with me daily. Your love is the best medicine around.

I began writing as part of my healing process and had no intention of ever sharing it publicly. However, each time I talked about it with my husband, he encouraged me to keep writing and—as a proud husband does—he boasted about my writing to friends, family members, and colleagues. His sharing sparked curiosity in other women. I found myself overwhelmed by their interest, questions, and willingness to discuss their own experiences. Often, hearing my story gave these women the encouragement to share their stories for the first time.

The more women I talked to, the more I realized that each of us has had a unique experience—from the uncomfortable gyn visit to the abnormal Pap test to the “I didn't know” lesson—but not all of us were talking about them. In fact, as evolved as I thought we women were, many of us were still very hush-hush about feminine issues and concerns. That subject was still taboo in many circles. Since having sex, going to the gynecologist, and dealing with feminine issues are all a natural part of womanhood, I decided it was time to speak out. There was no need to whisper about these subjects or talk only behind closed doors. I felt inspired to write more, and I published a few articles at the suggestion of one of my husband's clients.

I'd like to thank my family—those I'm tied to through biology and those who I've chosen as my family—for your love, support, and encouragement. I have been blessed with the best girlfriends a girl could ever ask for: I love you, Andi, Brooke, Caryn, Cathy, Halle, Janis, Janelle, Kristen, Kristi, Laura,

Tracy, and Trista. Alex, you are the best; thank you for being here. A special thanks to Caryn for proofing my earliest drafts and providing me with true, honest feedback, and to Alex, Brooke, Heather, and Halle. I couldn't have finished this project without you.

To my writer friends Cindy, Jacqueline, and Wendy: I am so appreciative of the advice and guidance you offered so freely, even when I didn't agree.

Helaine and Tracy: I can't express how much I have learned and grown while working with you. Thank you for the opportunities and friendship. I am a better advocate today because of the experience I have had with you.

Erin, my editor and friend—isn't life funny? When I started this book, I had no idea it would somehow lead me back to you. I believe people are brought into our paths for a reason, and so it is fitting that you, my best childhood friend, would reappear after nearly twelve years, just in time to help me shape the flow of my memoir. When we started collaborating on this project, I thought it was done. Boy, was I wrong. Thank you for challenging me and for asking the probing questions that helped to fill in the gaps and polish my story. At times in my life, you knew me better than anyone, yet our distance over the last decade has given you the objectivity that I needed to complete this project. Your unique and creative perspective made all the difference. I couldn't have finished without you.

Kacey, your integrity and work ethic stretch above and beyond. You are a master at the English language—my own personal Jedi! It was such a pleasure working with you and learning from you. Although we have never set eyes on each other, I feel like we have been friends for a lifetime.

Kristi and Evelyn, my first survivor sisters: thank you for opening up and allowing me to feel understood. You gave me hope in my darkest hours and you showed me the power in sharing and connecting with others.

Allison, Christine, and Tamika: each of you took an enormous tragedy in your life and transformed it into a beacon of light for other women. My survivor sisters are a daily inspiration to me, and I thank you for the work you do every day to educate other women. I am grateful for all the women who fought the battle against cervical cancer and won. I honor those who lost the fight, and I express my gratitude to the men who loved these ladies before, during, and after their journey.

And finally, in memory of my grandmother, Dr. Mary Lou Sweet Anderson, who taught me to stand strong and persevere. I love you more than words can ever say. Thank you for choosing to be my mother.

Life is a series of choices. For better or worse, they are ours to make and they give shape to our existence. Thank you all for choosing to be a part of my life and journey.

Introduction

Where does a story begin? Where does it end? As I sat to write about my journey and how it changed the course of my life, I struggled with these questions. Again and again, I found my mind drifting back to a college English assignment in which the professor asked me to write about the ten most influential or defining moments that shaped my life. Of course, I wrote that paper long before the majority of these events took place. But that exercise helped set the stage for the beginning of this book. In my long journey through the hell of HPV and cervical cancer, one particular week stood out above all others. I decided to start my story during that week and called it Part I. Those emotionally charged seven days seemed to divide my entire cancer experience into two parts: everything that came before (which I've included in Part II of this book) and everything that came after (which I've written about in Part III). I know it may seem unconventional to start in the middle of my story chronologically, and then to skip back in time in Part II and forward in time for Part III; but narratively, it felt right to launch from the point that shaped the course of my life. It perfectly encapsulated all that had happened and all that was about to unfold.

Looking back on that pivotal week, I also realized *why* I wanted to tell this story. We all go through those awkward teen years, when we are still adolescents but experiencing adult feelings. All those raging hormones catapult us into a new realm of sexuality, in which we try to figure out what feels right and how and when to express it. Most of us lack the foresight to see how our early sexual decisions—and every one that follows—can affect the rest of our lives. The fact that few adults seem to be willing to acknowledge that teens are having sex only deepens the confusion. The reluctance to talk about sex and sexual health doesn't go away as we get older. Now that I know firsthand the consequences of not talking about it, I think something needs to change.

The American Cancer Society reports that about 500,000 women worldwide are diagnosed with cervical cancer annually. More than 250,000 of them die from the disease. Even in a developed country like the United States, approximately 12,000 women are diagnosed with this preventable

disease every year, and one third of them die. We now know cervical cancer is caused by certain strains of the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus, commonly called HPV.

Consider this: according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately twenty million Americans are currently infected with HPV. Another six million people become newly infected each year. HPV is so common that approximately 80 percent of sexually active men and women get it at some point in their lives. And while not everyone who has sex or contracts HPV will get cancer, 3.5 million American women do have abnormal Pap tests annually. The treatment for abnormal Pap tests and cervical cancer can affect a woman's ability to bear children.

Just hearing the words "abnormal" and "Pap" in the same sentence can feel scary and isolating to a woman, but it can become downright paralyzing when she then considers whether or not to tell a parent, a friend, a friend-with-benefits, a boyfriend, a spouse—or anyone else, for that matter. An HPV diagnosis can make dating overwhelming and confusing: Do I have to tell a partner I have or had HPV? When do I tell? Can I still be intimate and engage in sexual activity? For those already in a relationship, additional concerns arise. Some are left to wonder if they contracted HPV from their partner, while others worry that if their beloved finds out about the diagnosis, he might leave. Any couple confronted with an illness inevitably faces the age-old concern: Can love truly survive both in sickness and in health? While I don't have all the answers to these questions, I do have my own experience to share as a guide.

I want everyone who reads this book to know two things: you are not alone, and we absolutely must start talking about sex and sexual health. It takes only one sexual encounter to get a STD that could affect the rest of your life. No matter what your age, if you are having sex—and let's face it, most of us are—you are at risk for coming into contact with HPV. I want women everywhere to be empowered, to open up and talk freely and fearlessly about their bodies, sexual experiences, and sexual health. Your life and reproductive future, or the life and reproductive future of someone close to you, just might depend on it. And yes, it is possible to still have a fulfilling, romantic relationship. So if you have a vagina or love someone with a vagina, this book is for you.

PART I
The Pivotal Week

April 2004

Turning Point

April 2004

This can't be happening. Not again. Not now.

I sat straight up, sweat dripping from my forehead, startled by what had become a recurring nightmare. I wiped the sleep from my eyes. *It's just a dream*, I realized as I got out of bed, trying to shake the fear.

It was Friday, April 16, 2004, and that time again. It happened every three months like clockwork, despite my best efforts to ignore it. Most women only make an annual trip to the gynecologist, but not me. As a twenty-nine-year-old cervical cancer survivor, I visited my gynecological oncologist at the change of every season. I hated these appointments—the poking, the prodding. No matter how many times I went, it never got easier. This day marked two years since I had been declared cancer free. I should have been celebrating, but I was actually dreading this appointment even more than usual. My annual exams, like the one today, were more extensive than the quarterly checkups. Plus, my doctor took extra precautions, given my cancer history. To treat my cancer, I had opted for a controversial procedure she wouldn't ever have recommended, but now the burden was on her to ensure that my cancer didn't return.

I tried to take my mind off the appointment by focusing on work. I was an assistant district manager for a national shoe retail chain, which is just a polite way of saying district manager-in-training, or as my boss said, "Ain't a district manager yet." I was reading yet another e-mail when I heard the humming of the garage door opening. Mark, my boyfriend of three years, walked in and called up to me, "Honey, I'm home. Are you ready to go?"

"Be right there," I yelled.

"Hurry. We're going to be late!"

I jumped up and raced down the stairs to meet him. "Let me just grab the medicine she prescribed. I'll meet you at the car."

I grabbed the pills and a bottle of water before I headed for the car. As

How I Lost My Uterus and Found My Voice

I settled into the passenger seat, Mark asked, “What are those and why are you taking them?”

“One is Lortab for pain, and the other is Valium to help me relax so the procedure will go more smoothly.” I added playfully, “That’s why you need to drive, mister.”

The medicine kicked in about twenty minutes later, as we arrived at the clinic. I reached for Mark’s arm and held on as we passed through the doorway. We signed in, sat down, and waited for my name to be called.

Finally, I heard the nurse say, “Michelle Coots?”

Only professional people called me Michelle. My friends and family knew me as Michi, pronounced Mickey, like the mouse.

The nurse directed me to the scale for the usual height and weight measurements. I kicked off my heels and stood against the wall. As usual I measured five feet, seven and a half inches. I always wished I were an inch or two taller, which is why I have to include the half. It’s also why I almost always wear heels. I stepped onto the scale: 130 pounds.

The nurse escorted Mark and me into the examination room and continued to take the usual vital statistics. “Dr. C. will be in shortly,” she said as she walked out.

I didn’t need any instructions; I was a pro and knew the drill. I undressed from the waist down and positioned myself on the examination table with the always flattering white sheet draped over my lower half. The next few minutes seemed like an eternity as I sat half-naked, freezing my buns off, waiting for the doctor. I was beginning to feel like I had downed a bottle of wine. *Oh, yeah, the medicine is definitely kicking in now!*

When Dr. C. entered the room, she began with the usual battery of questions. “How are you feeling? Has anything changed?” Blah, blah, blah. Then she made her normal plea: “You make me so nervous. I wish you would just get pregnant and let me remove your uterus so we can be sure you’re in the clear.”

Dr. C. was the third in a string of oncologists that had been in charge of my follow-up care since the dreaded diagnosis two and a half years ago. Each doctor had recommended a hysterectomy, and every time, I had refused. I didn’t know if I wanted children, but I knew I was not ready to give up my ability to make that choice. Instead, I had chosen a nontraditional procedure—a radical trachelectomy—to treat the cervical cancer. The doctors had removed a large portion of my cervix, but had left my uterus intact. Dr. C. was not a fan of my chosen course of treatment. She felt the radical trachelectomy was too new, that the overall long-term success rate was too uncertain. This was also the reason my annual checkups involved more than

Michelle L. Whitlock

the traditional Pap test. She wanted to track my recovery closely because she was skeptical that my cancer was really gone for good.

“Okay, are you ready, Michelle?”

“Ready as I am going to be,” I said, reaching for Mark’s hand.

“Slide down a little farther,” she instructed, as she made a tent with the white sheet over my knees. Even though I had done this a thousand times, those words always made my stomach queasy. I couldn’t think of a more vulnerable or awkward situation than lying with my bare butt exposed to the world, having a near stranger poking around inside my most private and personal spot. Reluctantly, I slid down until I felt the end of the table. *I hate this position!*

“Okay, this is going to be a little cold and you’re going to feel me insert the speculum. Now I am going to open it up. How are you doing?”

“Fine.” *But not really.*

“Okay, I need to numb the area with local anesthetic. Take a deep breath and hold it in. You are going to feel the prick of the needle and a little burning sensation.”

As the needle penetrated the base of my uterus, where my cervix used to be, I felt the instant burn of the medicine. I had taken the Lortab, but the pain came anyway. My body tightened, and I clenched Mark’s hand as I gasped for another breath.

“Are you still with me?” Dr. C. asked.

“Yeah,” I mumbled.

“Remember, deep, slow breaths.”

I didn’t respond. I was too busy focusing on my breathing so I wouldn’t knock her over and flee the room.

“Okay,” she said, “two more quick sticks. Now we’ll wait a few minutes and give the anesthetic time to take effect.”

My head felt fuzzy and my eyes were heavy. Those few minutes felt like hours. Finally Dr. C. checked to ensure that the area inside me was numb. Once she was confident that it was, she proceeded with a wet Pap.

“I want to take an extra step today,” she said when she was done with the Pap. “It’s called an endocervical curettage, or ECC, and it will help ensure that there’s no new cancer present.”

She talked me through the procedure as she went, explaining that she was making a small incision at the base of the uterus. Next, she inserted a spoon-shaped tool into the incision. She scraped around the interior walls where the uterus and the upper end of the vaginal canal had been sewn together after my last surgery. I breathed in and gnashed my teeth in a feeble attempt to counter the extreme discomfort. A few blessed moments later, she finished and instructed me to get dressed.

How I Lost My Uterus and Found My Voice

“The results should take about two weeks,” she said. “Assuming everything is okay, I shouldn’t need to see you for another four months.”

An extra month of freedom! I was elated with this news.

Mark helped me to the car. Between the medicine and the stomach cramps from the procedure, I was ready to get the hell out of there and home to my bed. I knew Mark had made dinner plans, but they would have to wait until the drugs wore off. Once we got home, I fell asleep quickly and snoozed for several hours.

I awoke still a little foggy from the medicine. “Hello, sleepyhead,” Mark teased as I struggled to adjust my eyes to the bright overhead light. “Ready for our big night out?”

“Can’t I have just a few more minutes?” I pleaded.

“Not a chance, baby. I’ve been planning this all week! Get those pretty baby blues open and your feet on the ground. I’ll start your shower.”

He turned on the water in the bathroom. Starting my shower was part of our usual morning drill. I hated leaving the comfort of my warm, snuggly sheets and being smacked in the face with the chill air from the air conditioner. A hot shower was one of the tricks Mark had learned to get my ass out of bed. I climbed in and let the water cascade over me. As I stood there with my eyes closed, I sighed as the tension of the day washed down the drain with the water.

Mark’s voice snapped me out of my reverie. “Hurry up! Our reservation is at eight. We need to leave in thirty minutes, hot lips. Chop, chop!”

I got out of the shower and sat down on the vanity stool in front of the mirror. Growing up in a dysfunctional family, I had learned to cultivate a tough exterior, to guard my vulnerabilities. In some ways, my makeup was like my armor. It was my way of choosing which version of me the world would see. With each stroke of the brush, I covered my visible imperfections, the ones that might leave me exposed, might make me seem less in the eyes of another. But it was more than that. I had grown up with a single dad who raised me the best way he knew how. However, let’s just say that he wasn’t into lipstick and eye shadow, so I missed out on a lot of the feminine rituals most girls shared with their mothers. Even now, thirty-odd years later, the girly stuff—picking out clothes and applying makeup—felt like such a treat that I liked to take my time with it.

After applying the requisite color to my cheeks and the perfect shade of mauve to make my blue eyes “pop,” I quickly used the blow-dryer on my shoulder-length red hair. I had always had a thing for loud, attention-grabbing red hair, so I went and got some. I slipped into my favorite jeans, a low-cut cotton shirt, and three-inch wedge heels. I took one final look in the mirror just as Mark poked his head in the door.

Michelle L. Whitlock

“Any day now!” he said, grinning.

I grabbed my bag and off we went.

Thirty minutes later we arrived at our favorite restaurant, ready to chow down on some the best Thai food Memphis had to offer. The hostess recognized us immediately and greeted us with a hug. Since the restaurant was packed, she asked us to wait at the bar.

Mark and I perched on stools and ordered two glasses of pinot grigio. As we enjoyed our wine, I found myself lost in thought, staring at the mirror hanging over the bar. The visit to the doctor weighed heavily on my mind. I tried each day to live my life in the present and to forget that I had even had cancer, but the appointment that day had brought all the memories rushing back. I couldn't help but wonder what my future held. *What will I look like as an old woman? Will I even get to be an old woman?*

I turned to Mark and asked, “What do you think I will look like in fifty years?”

He chuckled, but then he got a serious look on his face. He told me how much he loved me and loved our life together. He said he didn't think he could love me any more than he loved me at that moment, whether we were married or not. I wasn't sure what he was saying, but something told me it wasn't good. Mark had broken up with me once before, at a time when I was sure things were going great between us. *Oh, no. Not again. Is he trying to tell me that he loves me but never wants to get married? Or is this another attempt to break it off by letting me down easy?* My heart began to beat faster, and I felt like a brick had dropped into the pit of my stomach. As I sat in silence, avoiding looking at him, I felt my eyes grow heavy with the weight of oncoming tears.

Of course Mark noticed the change in my expression and instantly asked what was wrong.

“Nothing, I'm fine,” I said, which really meant that everything was wrong and, no, I wouldn't talk about it.

Mark tried to get me to open up. “Baby, please talk to me.”

I resisted. I just didn't want to get into it. I stared at the ceiling, an old trick I used to fight back tears. Finally, I broke. “If you didn't want to marry me, you could have told me months ago. You let me think our relationship was leading to something more.” Mark tried to interrupt, but I cut him off and continued. “I was fine before, thinking we would never get married, but then lately you started talking about marriage and got my hopes up. Hell, Mark, you even took me to the bookstore to look at wedding vows.” By now the tears, mixed with black mascara, flowed down my cheeks.

“No, baby,” Mark said, “you have it all wrong. Will you marry me?”

I felt my face heat with an angry flush. “No. Don't patronize me by asking me now.”

How I Lost My Uterus and Found My Voice

Mark slid his stool back from the bar. "I am really serious. Will you marry me? I was trying to ask you all along. I brought you here to propose!"

He went down on his knee and asked a third time. "Will you marry me?"

"Mark, stand up and stop this! People are looking at us!"

He stood and placed his hand in his pocket. "What do I have to do, pull out a ring?"

I looked down at his hand, which held a sparkling round diamond set in a beautiful gold band. I was speechless.

It finally dawned on me that he wasn't kidding. "Yes, of course," I shouted as I threw my arms around him.

The sound of wild applause filled the restaurant just as the hostess came over to seat us. Over a dinner of green curry and rice, we laughed and joked about the catastrophe that Mark's proposal had almost become. I had truly thought he was telling me that he never wanted to marry me.

That night as we drove home, I pulled out my cell phone and called everyone I could think of to share our news. I couldn't believe we were actually getting married!

The next morning, Saturday, as I began to talk about wedding plans, Mark set a few ground rules. He wanted a barefoot beach wedding and our own vows. He rejected traditional vows in favor of something more personal: a passage from the book *Conversations with God* by Neale Donald Walsch. My only stipulation was the date: June 18, the anniversary of the night we met. It just so happened that we already had a beach getaway planned for that date. Every June for the past three years, we had taken a trip to celebrate our anniversary. This year, we had plans to vacation in Negril, Jamaica. The aptly named Couple's Resort had come highly recommended by a colleague and close friend of mine. When we had made the reservation several months earlier, I had had no idea we'd be getting married, but now it seemed like a no-brainer. Our beach vacation would be the perfect time and place to make it all official.

Once we agreed on Jamaica, we jumped out of bed and ran upstairs to the computer. Mark typed "Couples Resort Jamaica" into the browser line, and within a few minutes we had all the answers we needed to arrange our wedding. We sent an e-mail to the resort's wedding coordinator, reserving our date and requesting the last ceremony of the day. (The sun setting over the ocean would make the perfect backdrop.) The rest of that day and most of the next was consumed with wedding talk, and before we knew it, it was time to get back to our busy work schedules.

The start of the week was a total blur. I was covering for the district manager who was out of town, which meant double the workload. I didn't

Michelle L. Whitlock

even know where Monday and Tuesday went. Wednesday, however, was a long day—eleven hours to be exact—but I didn't mind because I was still on cloud nine. In fact, I was so wrapped up in engagement bliss, I had completely forgotten about my visit to the doctor the week before.

I pulled into the driveway a little before nine Wednesday night and noticed that Mark was not home yet. As usual, when I opened the door, our dogs George and Charlee came running, wagging their tails and covering me in wet kisses.

As I kicked off my shoes, I noticed the answering machine light blinking red. I didn't check the message immediately. Instead, I began my evening ritual of running a hot bath in our large Jacuzzi-style tub. I undressed, dropped my clothes on the floor, and turned on the water.

While I waited for the tub to fill, I called our voice mail. I assumed the message was from a telemarketer. Anyone who knew us, knew Mark and I didn't answer the house phone and seldom checked the messages. If our friends wanted to reach us, they called our cell phones. I dialed in and heard the robotic greeter say, "You have one new message." I pressed the button and heard a familiar voice. "Michelle, this is Dr. C. Please give me a call back at the office as soon as you get this message."

My mouth dropped open as the phone slipped from my hand and crashed to the floor. I stood there frozen, unable to compose myself. The message was short, but it spoke volumes. Instinctively, I reached down and picked up the phone. I don't remember dialing, but before I knew it I could hear Mark's voice on the other end of the line.

"Michi? Michi? Hello? What's going on?"

With my voice trembling, I simply said, "I have cancer—again."

"What? What are you talking about? That's crazy!"

"Dr. C. called and left a message on the machine today."

"Well, what did she say?"

"Nothing. Just to give her a call at the office."

"That's it, that's all? Okay, so she wants you to call. That doesn't mean anything. Why are you so freaked out? I'm sure it's nothing. We'll call her first thing tomorrow."

"No! You don't understand. If everything was fine her nurse, Robin, would have called with the results, or they would have sent me a postcard saying, 'Everything is okay. See you in four months.'"

"Maybe Robin was busy and Dr. C. decided to make the call herself. Don't you think you're jumping to conclusions?"

"No. Dr. C. would only make the call if something was wrong. I am telling you, I have cancer again!"

"Michi, calm down. I am going to be home in about ten minutes. Why

How I Lost My Uterus and Found My Voice

don't you get into your tub and try to chill out for a minute? I will see you as fast as I can get back to the house."

I slid into the hot water and rested my head against the back of the tub, shell-shocked. It probably took Mark thirty minutes to get home, but it felt like hours. He immediately joined me in the bathroom, sitting Indian-style on the floor. We replayed the same conversation several times, before I finally told him I wanted to be alone for a while. I knew Mark was just being logical, but I had been around this block before and deep in my gut I just knew.

No, no, no, this can't be happening! Not now. He finally proposed. I am making wedding plans. It's my turn for the fairy tale, for the happily ever after. This just can't be. I cannot have cancer again ... especially not now.

I closed my eyes and recalled the journey we had already taken, from the day we met to this moment.