

SundayReview | OPINION

20-Something, With Menopause

By IBBY CAPUTO JUNE 25, 2016

CANCER aged me.

I received a diagnosis of acute myelogenous leukemia in my mid-20s, and after five months in the hospital and a year in medically required isolation, I felt like an old lady, fragile and tired.

Then, slowly, I got better. I'm healthy and in my 30s now. Like many young adult cancer survivors, I've lived life out of order. I already know how the story ends.

It's weird being both young and old at the same time. Sometimes people remark that my eyes twinkle, how lovely! But it's just the way light reflects off the plastic lenses inserted during cataract surgery, a surgery I needed because of long-term steroid treatment.

I've previewed what it's like to be in my 80s. But I've also felt about 2 years old. It was after a bone-marrow transplant and a harrowing month with viral meningitis. I was extremely weak and had trouble walking. My friend who was taking care of me drew me a bath. I got in after she left the room, but the water was cold. I didn't have the energy to get out, so I just hugged my knees, crying until she came back.

A few weeks later, after gaining some strength, I stood naked in front of the mirror. My body looked prepubescent. Five foot eight, but only 118 pounds, I was flat-chested and hairless. Not like a woman at all, but an 11-year-old girl. That was when I realized I am not my body.

It's also when I vowed never to diet again. Before I got sick, I thought my legs were too fat, my body too thick, my nose too flat. How silly I was!

But now I know — I really *know* — that one day my life will end. This helps me put a lot of things in perspective.

I've been healthy for eight years. I'm married now. My career is on track. Life seems to be in order. But something happened recently that threw me off balance: An endocrinologist suggested I go off birth control.

I'm not on birth control to prevent pregnancy; for me the pill replaces the hormones that my body no longer creates.

I went through menopause at 26. My last period went out with a bang. The doctors gave me a shot to suspend menstruation while I underwent chemotherapy, but it didn't work. My period had already started, and because my blood was chock-full of leukemia, it wasn't able to clot, and the chemotherapy promoted the bleeding as well.

I bled for a month. I bled so much that I had to wear adult diapers. I received a lot of blood transfusions.

The chemo didn't work, and I needed a bone-marrow transplant. I remember sitting crossed-legged on the hospital bed, a pile of tissues next to me, crying about what this meant. I would have to undergo "conditioning" for the transplant, which included full body radiation. They told me they would put little lead shields over my lungs, but could do nothing to protect my ovaries.

After the transplant, menopause happened in a flash. I'd wake up drenched. My pajamas soaked, the sheets soaked.

People don't really talk about menopause. At least my peers don't. Maybe older women commiserate about their shared experiences. But none of them talked to me.

I felt like damaged goods. Like I was walking around with something dead inside of me. At one point I had an **ultrasound** and the technician said one of my ovaries looked shriveled. Huh. My fertility wasn't only dead, it was shriveled and

dead.

After a year without a period, the doctors started me on birth control, which supplied me with hormones. I remember driving through New York with my mother. I was 27. It was Fleet Week, and there were all these sailors — gorgeous, strong men, in tailored white and blue suits — walking around the city. My mom had to hold me back from jumping out at a stop light, I was so hungry for love. After that I asked my doctor if I could ease more slowly into the hormones.

The birth control gives me fake periods, which at first I thought was cruel, but then it just became normal. I met a man who didn't care about the state of my ovaries, we married, and life moved on.

But recently, I learned that some women regain ovary function after bone-marrow transplants. The endocrinologist said if I went off the pill, a simple blood test could tell him if I was fertile. He told me it's not very likely, but I should use protection if I'm not ready to have a child.

Ready to have a child? From my own womb? His advice made me angry at first. The fertility door had closed a long time ago. It broke my heart when it closed. But the doctor encouraged me with such enthusiasm.

I thought of Schrödinger's cat — both dead and alive until you open the box. My transplant doctor, who knows me best, advised me not to open the box. Why give yourself hope? Stay on the pill and start thinking about adoption instead, he advised. Only one of his patients had ever regained ovary function. Incidentally, she just had a baby, he told me.

But how could I not open the box? Find out if I'm still viable? Valuable? Able to create life? I had taken stock of the wreckage left in the wake of my illness long ago, but maybe the inventory had changed.

I decided to go off the pill. This prompted a new conversation with my husband. Do we want to have a baby? How far would we go to have a baby? I've already been through so many invasive procedures. Are we in a position to consider adoption? Do we want to adopt? There are so many children who need loving homes. I thought of

all the other women in their 30s worrying about their fertility. The conversation seemed so ... normal.

And this strange thing happened. The very slim chance that I might become pregnant made me feel more alive. As if what I thought was dead, was only asleep, and now it might wake again.

I know my transplant doctor would call this false hope. And most likely he is right.

But when you have lived life out of order, it's sweet to get a taste of the chapters that you've missed.

Ibby Caputo is a multimedia journalist and was a 2014-2015 M.I.T.-Knight Science Journalism Fellow.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTOpinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on June 26, 2016, on page SR9 of the New York edition with the headline: 20-Something, With Menopause.