

# ARE YOU A SURVIVOR?

A NOVEL

KAREN CONDON



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# **DEDICATION**

For my parents.

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## PREFACE

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in September, 2001. I was thirty-six. From the day of the biopsy to the last day of my radiation treatment the following March, strangers loomed closer than they ever had before. Doctors palpated my breasts, entered examining rooms briskly, eyes averted, spoke to me at a slant. Nurses injected me with toxic drugs. Anonymous co-workers promised to pray for me, distant acquaintances exclaimed over how brave I was, social workers suggested writing self-affirmations on index cards and pinning them up around the house. Nutritionists explained how to make protein shakes. Surgeons told me to think of my favorite place while they waited for the anesthetic to take me under. Cancer survivors handed me stuffed animals, pink ribbon pins, and beribboned gift bags filled with swag.

I resented the attention of these strangers and was grateful for it. Their skills and their treatments were making me sick and they were saving my life; their gifts were cloying and infantile and well-intentioned. So I became stoic and compliant – a model cancer patient. I accepted the hugs and made a place on my bureau for the teddy bears and the scented candles. I ate when I wasn't hungry. I avoided babies, sick people, and crowds. I distracted myself. Encouraged to exercise, I swam laps and walked the dog. I read and

worked and spent time with friends – though for shorter stretches of time, and more cautiously and self-consciously.

I kept living my life, except that I didn't write. It wasn't just that I was exhausted and sick. The strangers loomed too close. I never felt alone enough. I'd write about it later, I thought, when it was over.

After my last radiation treatment, though, when the strangers had retreated to a more comfortable distance, I still resisted writing about cancer and cancer treatment. I didn't want to relive it, or to label myself – cancer patient, cancer fighter, cancer survivor, cancer writer. I wanted to shed that identity and be a writer of fiction again. I wanted to write about people I didn't know, about healthy people and people confident in each other's health. I wanted to create characters who were preoccupied with something other than tumors and lymph nodes, IV lines and radiation beams, the voices of strangers. I wanted to strive, through fiction, for the kind of inertia and narrative arcs and epiphanies that didn't – couldn't, I felt – exist in chemo suites and hospital waiting rooms.

Of course, I knew, deep down, that they don't exist anywhere else, either. In fact, I knew that before I was diagnosed. They exist in the imagination and in stories.

Several months after I'd completed my treatment, I read a newspaper article describing a former Miss America's visit to the chemotherapy suite of a local hospital. I was stunned. Though the patients were apparently grateful to her, I was outraged for them, at this outlandish violation of their privacy. What would I have done, I wondered? Nothing, I supposed. I would have been so taken off guard by this stranger among strangers (though she was the only one with a tiara), so unprepared for such a bizarre apparition, and so focused on surviving that I would have shut down.

That's when this novel's narrator appeared. She, too, was a stranger to me, but one I wanted to get to know.

Karen Condon

## CHAPTER ONE

### SEEING GHOSTS

I stood in the doorway between living room and foyer, waiting for the commercial so I could tell my husband about the girl who'd died in our house. The neighbor had been out in the yard when I was on my way out for my doctor's appointment, and she'd told me. We had not spoken to those neighbors since we'd moved in a month before, but that day she decided she felt like coming over holding her watering can – she'd been out watering her summer perennials, though they would be frosted out in a week or two. Even when we sold the house after the divorce, the only things we knew about these neighbors were things we could see: that they had a pool that they never used, an ugly, collapsing carport, a daughter with a ne'er do well boyfriend who honked his horn and waited in the car when he came to take her out. They never looked at or spoke to us, though they did seem to sense our presence.

I was interested in what she told me about the girl who died in our house. Everyone's interested in other people's deaths. And it seemed like something we ought to know about our new house, to help explain apparitions and disembodied voices. Not that there had been any, or that either of us believed in such things.

On the television screen, a pair of animated gladiators sparred on a tilted black plane. The object of the game was to knock your

opponent into oblivion. There was nothing else in their world. Just the two of them, the black plane, and whoever had put them there. Soon there would only be one of them left. Where could it go from there?

To a commercial, that's where. A towheaded boy in a soccer uniform climbed into a minivan through its side door, followed by a smiling golden retriever. From the driver's seat, his mother watched him slyly, teeth gleaming. I crossed the room and sat down tentatively on the other end of the sofa.

"Someone died in this house," I said.

"Yeah? Who?"

"A girl with cancer," I said. "Her room is the one up in the attic."

"How do you know?"

"The neighbor told me. She was out back today and she told me."

"That's sad."

I wondered if he meant it was sad that my neighbor and I had been out back talking about a girl who'd died, or that the girl had died, or both.

"Was she friendly?"

It took me a second to realize he meant the neighbor and not the dead girl.

"No."

"What was she like, then?"

I thought about what she'd been like but drew a blank. I remembered she had very small, very clean hands, and that her watering can was empty, and that she kept her empty hand clenched in a tiny fist while we talked. No, she hadn't been friendly. She'd been dutiful, afraid, and relieved when the conversation was over.

"Informative," I said, looking from him to the TV screen, where a young blonde woman was examining the reflection of her teeth in the bathroom mirror, turning her head from side to side.

She tilted her head and pouted fetchingly. I ran my tongue over my own teeth. I thought, they aren't clean enough, they aren't white enough. I should have taken better care of them.

"I wonder if she left a ghost," he said, twirling the remote.

"She didn't say. I suppose if she knew there was a ghost she would have told me."

"Maybe she thought you don't believe in ghosts."

"But even if she did think that, if she thought she'd seen the ghost, you'd think she'd have told me about it. To her it would have been reality, and she'd have thought I should believe in it."

Actually, I thought, once you know about someone who's died, it's hard not to believe in their ghost, even if you never see it. I thought this one would look more ordinary than you'd expect: just a girl with nothing to do.

The show came back on. He un-muted the sound and got that look on his face. Listening time was over, but I'd talk to myself if I had to.

"I don't really get why she chose today to come out and tell me," I said. "She didn't seem all that pleased to meet me. She didn't invite us for drinks or give me a Bundt cake or anything."

The gladiators stood at opposite ends of the black plane, their sabers at their sides. I wanted him to stop watching. I was used to wanting him to stop watching television, but this was different, now that I knew what I knew.

"Maybe she's shy."

"What if you saw a ghost?" I said. "Would you be scared?"

"Nope."

"Say it's three in the morning, and you wake up because I'm snoring and you have to go to the bathroom. So you go out in the hall, and as you turn on the hall light, you feel something brush against the back of your hand. And there in front of you is the ghost of the girl. Then would you be scared?"

"Why do you want me to be scared?"

“I don’t,” I said.

The gladiators circled silently. I touched the lump on my right breast with the pads of my fingers. It was hard and well-formed, like a pearl.

“I’m going to bed.”

The gladiators sprang.

I climbed the dark staircase and stood at the top of the stairs, breathless, spine tingling, feeling around in a panic for the light-pull. Something soft brushed the back of my hand. I brought my arms down to my sides and stood there stiffly. The ghost had found me. It knew I believed in it now.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ARE YOU A SURVIVOR?

**T**he blond woman sitting across the table from where my husband and I were standing in the hospital lobby patted her hair and smiled up at me.

“Are you a survivor?” she asked.

On the table between us were dozens of glossy white gift bags, their handles tied together with spirals of pink ribbon. I turned to my husband. He was holding his head at its public tilt. He’d put on an affable, remote smile.

“I was just diagnosed,” I said.

“We are all survivors,” she said.

She nodded, agreeing with herself. The two women sitting on either side of her nodded. I nodded. She was right. I was a survivor of everything that had happened to me up till this moment.

“I had chemo,” said the first one. “And look, now I have a French braid.”

“That’s great,” said my husband.

“Is the color real?” I said.

I could see cancer was going to make me mean. Reinforcements appeared to come in from behind her smile, to hold it in position. She dropped her eyes and covered her teeth with her lips.

“Have a gift bag,” she said.

I picked one up and let it dangle on my index and second fingers. We turned away from the survivors.

“Don’t you want one?” I asked my husband as we moved off.

“You have to be a survivor.”

“We are all survivors,” I said.

We scanned the pink-clad tables that confronted us now. We had come to the local hospital the day after my biopsy because the Oncology Department’s social worker had invited us to a reading by a woman who had survived breast cancer and written a book about it. They’d sent this social worker down to see me minutes after I’d been brought to recovery from the surgery and my husband had told me that the lump in my right breast was cancerous. The surgeon hadn’t even had to send it to a pathologist, my husband said.

“He can tell by looking at it?” I said. “What, by the color?”

He didn’t know. The surgeon had done hundreds of these biopsies, though, and this one was definitely made of cancer. Happy, healthy cancer, looking forward to releasing its progeny into my lymph nodes to course blithely through my bloodstream and colonize my organs like an empire.

Then people started talking. My husband, the surgeon, and this social worker talked to each other, to random passersby, and occasionally to me. There was so much talking going on that whenever someone wanted to speak only to me they had to get up close to me and enunciate their words in loud, urgent voices. First there was the social worker, who told me about cancer treatment. Behind her, the surgeon had reappeared and was standing against the wall facing me, as though daring me to throw knives at him. She handed me festive illustrated cancer pamphlets. She was exhilarated. She was overwrought. She was wearing bright, jungle-inspired colors. She was like a disoriented exotic bird about to fly into a plate glass window.

Then there were the nurses. Marjorie was the one who had prepared me for surgery. We had joked back and forth. She had calmly

stuck the IV into my arm. She had troubled hair and eyes that were sad and happy at the same time. I loved her. But instead of Marjorie, a nurse with a mist of frizzy gray hair and eyes like two jellyfish put her face up close to mine.

“I will pray for you,” she said.

Another nurse-head appeared. It had shiny lips, as if it had just licked them.

“You’re in my thoughts,” it mouthed.

Another nurse stuck her face in and said something too fast for me to understand. They seemed to be waiting in line. I prepared myself for the next one, but some hands drew curtains in front of me and I was alone again.

“I’m going to die,” I said, to see how it sounded.

My husband had gone over to the surgeon and they were talking. I leaned forward and yanked the curtains open and watched my husband’s and the surgeon’s hands moving in the air between their faces as they talked in front of the pale blue wall across from my chair.

“Marjorie,” I said.

The doctor and my husband kept talking. My voice was weak. It was a dream voice, like when you’re in a part of the dream when you’re calling for help but your voice is too weak to be heard. I shut my eyes. Cool hands on either side of my face. I opened my eyes.

“Let’s get you out of here,” Marjorie told me.

Marjorie and I were in this together.

Now, standing in the entrance to the banquet room, I scanned the room for Marjorie, but why would she want to hang around the hospital after hours? Why would any of us want to? The pink tables, the French braids, the survivors?

“I’m so mean,” I told myself. “I’m always trying to be funny, and I’m mean.”

There was a long pink-clad table at this end of the room with big chrome urns of coffee and hot water and platters of cold cuts

and raw vegetables and crackers and fruit and cookies and cake. Women stood around, warbling to each other. Suddenly they all laughed together, bending back at the waist.

We sat down at the end of a table that had only three people sitting at it, one of them a thin woman with thin, colorless hair and a pale narrow face. She had a walker next to her seat. Her plate was heaped with fruit and vegetables, and she was smiling expectantly at me, as if waiting for me to recognize her. I smiled back, and, still smiling, peered into my gift bag. I reached inside and drew out the objects inside, laying them on the table one by one. There was a flower bulb, a cylinder of talcum powder, a pink hand-knit object, pens advertising pharmaceutical drugs, note pads advertising pharmaceutical drugs, a pink scented candle advertising pharmaceutical drugs.

“I want to make a sarcastic comment,” I said to my husband.

“Nothing has ever stopped you before.”

“I don’t want to be here,” I said. “I don’t know why she thought I’d want to be here.”

“Because you’re a survivor, maybe.”

That pissed me off.

“She’s a survivor,” I snapped, pointing at the woman with the walker. “I’m no survivor.”

She was over at the end of the food table hunting for something – she almost seemed to be sniffing – and when she caught my eye she stepped towards me, but I turned away. I didn’t want to know her. I didn’t want to know and be talked to by nurses and surgeons and social workers. I didn’t want people praying for me or sticking me in their thoughts. I didn’t want talcum powder and flower bulbs. I didn’t want to advertise pharmaceutical drugs. I didn’t want pink anything. I didn’t want a French braid. I didn’t want free food. I didn’t want to be read to. I didn’t want to survive what the lady author had survived and then write a book about it. And yet here I was in this room with walls the color of the inside of a mouth,

surrounded by all of these things, by all of these pleased survivors. I would never be ready for this. There would never be enough time to get ready for this.