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A Mother's Story

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A Mother's Story

Boys love bones. Women are supposed to be small, to not take up space, to be unthreatening, to speak softly. I am too big, too tall, too broad. I speak loudly, lead forcibly, want too much. I blame both breadth and height on my father. Paternal force overtakes the maternal even in the gene pool.

Where my collarbone meets my shoulder there is a bump like a small hill covered with peach sunlight and a snowy dusting of fuzz. In my dorm room, I take boys' fingertips and run them along the length of my clavicle. Each hookup the same, my body a series of tracks, and I the conductor. Backs of knees slick, room humid, I run their hands down my ribs and make them touch each ripple where bone pokes through skin. I kiss these boys, touch my tongue to anonymous lips while my beer-soaked clothes lie crumpled on the floor. I position my body so they cannot feel the fleshy parts pooling above my hip. I have it down to a science of illusion – an age-old performance concealed under the cover of sticky city nights. I become more precise each time, able to hide my body from their wandering hands so they only feel the choice cuts.

I never sleep in these boys' beds, they come to me. I have three blankets. I like the pressure on my body, holding me down, grounding me in sleep. Inevitably, if I don't make sure to pull the covers over my body before I dose off, in the morning, the boy will catch a glimpse and ask about the lines on my breasts. Once, one of them, while I was still half-asleep and too drowsy to do anything about it, went off his designated track. He traced one of the scars with his finger where there is a spidery mark that curls itself around my nipple and draws down to cup my breast's under layer. I never allowed that to happen again.

In the morning I smile and get out of bed a certain way. Show them how delicately my spine protrudes in little bumps on my back if I lean over just so. How my shoulder blades stick out like the singed wings of Icarus when I reach for my underwear. I never tell any of them that those lines on my chest mark where a surgeon carved out tissue to make me less of a woman and more myself. There is always a part of me that wants to tell them of a fantastic illness that led to a rushed surgery to slice open my chest and remove some malignant growth. I hold my tongue. I owe them no explanation – not even a made up one.

Boys also love breasts. It's the one place they want women to be soft. Before my chest was carved out and remolded, I felt ashamed of my body, as if I had been made as a mistake and gotten somebody else's blueprints. I drew up my own blueprints instead.

I am fifteen and standing before my mother with my sweatshirt and t-shirt in a pile on the floor. I'm wearing fuzzy sweatpants. It is the night before my surgery. "This is how I was made, isn't there something to that? Like what if this throws some sort of balance off?"

My mother rolls her eyes and tells me I'm being melodramatic. "You'll feel so much better, so much like *yourself*, Salem. Trust me, trust me baby. Your dad and I support you in this decision." This decision I am making at fifteen to whittle myself down. This decision I am making so young to irrevocably change my body.

My Dad had talked on the phone with insurance companies for months before this night: exaggerating my back pain, citing my BMI on the phone to men sitting at desks filing claims. These anonymous insurance men who wielded control over my body. Men in drab khaki suits going home to microwave dinners playing God. They had held power for almost a year over the lanky fifteen-year-old girl with peach fuzzed shoulders yearning to change her body. No more. They

finally approved the claim. Here I stood, on the brink of transformation, armored in cupcake-printed sweatpants.

The next afternoon I lie flat in the back seat of my parent's car. We speed down the yellow-tinted Southern highway. My chest feels hollow and aching. I think this is what Galatea must have felt like as Pygmalion carved her. A man has carved me out too, though in my own ideal image of myself and not his. No more will I be ashamed of my body in department stores, no longer will I have to wear heavy underwire bras. No more will I have to slump and hide under big sweaters and shy away from V-necks that formerly looked slutty, thirsty, desperate on me just because of my body shape.

My breasts are turned marble, a bleeding, stitched up marble. There is permanent marker drawn beneath the stiches. I refuse to look at my breasts at first. I am Frankenstein's bride, torn up, lifeless with pain pills. In the coming weeks, the black-marked glue flakes off into the bathtub water. I am changed from Frankenstein's bride back to Galatea. I feel perfect, unlimited, sealed up. No milk. *Unsex me here.*

I am newly carved, less a woman. Less space taken up, more a woman. More myself. I am renewed, comfortable again with my body. Between my legs feels raw and rubbed and uncontrollable. I am lying in my childhood bed in my seventeenth summer. In a year I will be packing for college. I will be packing up this memory too. A boy with a mop of blonde hair is lying next to me. The sheets are hot, tangled, constricting. My throat feels tight.

"You have a beautiful body," he says. Not that I am a whole person. Not that I am a beautiful girl. I have a beautiful body because it serves a purpose for him, it is useful for him to advance his own pleasure. He does not care that he has just taken something from me. Something mythic, something ephemeral, something immaterial with an inexplicable weight that leaves a kind of phantom absence. You cannot lose what was never there. This is what I tell myself. I was not his first but he was mine. An imbalance. I have already tampered with my body's shape, and now have lost what was so easy to retain. He does not understand this. How can he. How can they? When men can put themselves in anything that moves, do not have to receive, do not have the ability to bear the physical burden of another's life.

"I want you." That is all they say. Ever. Even if they cover it up with some other words, something else, a present, a rose. That is what they are saying. That is the rhythm beneath it all, the pulsating undercurrent: *desire, desire: black and deep desires.* Nothing more.

"I want you," he says again. I tell this boy he is a nice person. He squeezes the bony parts that are all he knows of me. I fall asleep with this boy's wet breathing in my ear.

It is the next week, the last day of summer. My best friend Liz tells me she likes a girl. I have trouble responding but don't know why. Something cracks inside of me. I tell her finally about the blonde boy in my bed. The newness. The terror. The brevity of the whole thing. In a year she and the girl are in love.

I am in my first year of college, and I miss my best friend. I do not understand the people here, the school is too big, the people faceless. The city is too loud, too dirty, too drab. I am studious and aloof in the daytime. I devour the boys at night, knock off backward baseball caps and suck cocky smirks from tasteless lips. Galatea the vampire.

I find myself drawn to the city's museums between classes. I aimlessly wander, trancelike, through the medieval and renaissance wings. I am fascinated with each artists' depiction of the Christ child. I decide most of them look like pigs. The babies are fleshy and ill proportioned in Mary's lap. Too soft, too many rolls, simpering eyes, bright red mushy mouth. Mary sits so often

resigned, Joseph looming over her. The idealized family and their pig baby.

My husband and I met there, at the Metropolitan Museum. A romantic story told a hundred times, each more distorted than the last, at our wedding. He found me in the European wing. My hair was still long, eyes open and ready to suck the world dry. The gallery number is engraved on the inside of our wedding bands: 630. Our code. I had been out of school for a few months, working for a gallery, hoping to get experience and a little money before applying to graduate programs. I had found, a couple of weeks before, in this very gallery, a grotesque Jacob Jordaens, with a fantastically ugly baby. A jackpot discovery.

In this painting, the Virgin's skin is porcelain, her nose angular and lips plush. She holds her breast, cupping her nipple between parted fingers for her pig-baby's flaccid mouth. Her breast is milky, scar-less. The head of the baby itself seems to be merely slapped onto his deformed body. Three men look on, they are saints. The men don't look at her, but at the child. Mary's eyes are downcast. Woman invisible.

"They never get the babies right." A man's voice rang out. I turned; we were the only two people in the room. Gallery 630 held less impressive paintings. A small gallery, it went unnoticed by most.

I laughed, flipping my hair. "No - it's funny, isn't it?"

He walked closer, a smile at the corner of his mouth. He bent to inspect the painting, "A little creepy maybe, huh?"

"I guess."

He stuck out his hand. It was pale, the purple veins showing through near-translucent skin. I took it, "Adam."

I smiled, "Salem." His eyes were dark, with a purplish shadow underneath, his hair light and shining. He seemed so different from the ruddy Southern boys with whom I'd grown up. I could not imagine this boy driving a pickup truck, off-roading through red clay, back-flipping off somebody's Carolina dock.

"Salem. Like the witch hunts."

"Just like that," I said. We stood there in that gallery, looking at each other. The saints peered out at us from their layers of varnish, watching the gears of an age-old story click into motion. Mary did not look up.

"Why are you always so quiet?" We are lying in bed, in *my* bed. Though I have the smaller apartment, I still refuse to sleep over at his place. Old habits.

"What?"

"You're quiet. You never - " Adam rolls over onto his stomach to look at me, resting his hand in the indent between my ribs. Boys love bones and men love them more. "I don't know, you never even make a *peep*."

"Oh." That. He meant during. "I mean I don't know. I just don't." I shrug. "Never have."

"It's *natural* to say something."

I laugh and put my hand over his, where it rests below the spider-web lines on my chest. We've been dating for a year, I'm almost twenty-three. He was the first boy I ever told about the scars. I told him the first time we slept together. A night just like this one. "Everybody's *different*, Adam." He smiles and kisses my brow, rolling over onto his side. I know he isn't asleep.

The truth is I cannot open my mouth. I'll scream bloody murder otherwise. An orgasm is a prison. So is pain. They're two sides of the same coin - for their duration, they completely overpower all other senses. One is terrible pleasure, the other terrible agony.

Three years later we marry. Two more and I am pregnant.

I am twenty-one, home for Spring break of my senior year of college. Liz is home for the weekend to see me. Her girlfriend Helen drove down with her, and we're all in Liz's room, legs crossed, beers in hand. It's nice to be out of New York for a weekend, to bask in the quiet of my small Southern city.

Helen and Liz are sitting achingly close, skin melting into each other. I can tell what they want - what they need, but I don't want to leave yet. I want to soak up this time with Liz, to remember this night. I sit in the present fighting off the patina of nostalgia even as I live it. "Are you excited, Salem?" Helen is looking at me, hand on Liz's thigh.

I shrug, feeling a little clouded from the beer, "I guess, I mean I'm excited to be out in the real world after graduation, whatever that means. And the gallery should be fun."

Liz smiles and reaches over to pat my hand, "And we'll be so close." Liz is going to med school in New York, I'll be working in the city.

I grin, and Helen shifts beside Liz, a year ahead, and already in med school, "You'll love it, Salem." The conversation is dying, and though I don't want to leave, I know I've overstayed my welcome. Liz's and my friendship has grown throughout the years to accommodate Helen, the once -whispered crush. It is in these moments that I ache for the days where there was only Liz and me. I uncross my legs and stand up, a little unsteadily. "You sure you're ok to walk back by yourself?"

I roll my eyes. "I've been doing this walk since diapers, I think I'll be ok, buddy."

Liz stands up, "Maybe you should sleep here."

"No, no it's okay, really. It's just down the street." I open the door, Liz gives me a kiss on the cheek. I walk down the stairs and let myself out of the sleeping house. I sit on the curb, collecting myself, house key clutched in my hand. I look up. Liz's window shade is open. I can see she and Helen in bed, sitting up, just talking. It seems there is no world for them outside of that room. I think how, in my own dorm room, the boys never want to sit up like that and talk, just *talk*. They always want something from me, have some ulterior motive. Desire diminishes personhood. I decide not to indulge my envious voyeurism. I walk down the block to my house. The streetlights are yellow and dim. I feel empty and incomplete.

That night, something inside of me shifts. I am, after all, a woman of flesh and blood, I have a heart that beats underneath a scarred breast. I discover that night what I've been looking for in those sticky dorms. Just a look. For somebody to look at me like that. I would not get that from the boys I take home. They hold me in a grotesque pantomime of the way Helen holds Liz. The boys' connection with me is conditional. They say pretty things, how they *want me* they *want me*. What do I want from them? What could they give me?

Several months later, Adam and I meet. He eventually gives me Jack. Sometimes the baby looks at me the way I saw Helen look at Liz that night, and in those rare moments I feel whole. The unconditional love of a child for his mother is harder won than that of a mother's love for her child. A mother must do her part, lay the groundwork. Sacrifice.

The baby has been crying for three hours straight. His hands are clenched into tight balls and his pink skin is webbed and blotchy with purple and white. I'm holding him close to me, rocking him back and forth, back and forth, as I imagine my mother doing for me. His eyes are squeezed tight. I picture his eyeballs falling into cranial abyss from their sockets, dropping down into his tiny body, stopping in bulges at his feet.

"Adam!" My husband comes running down the stairs, hastily knotting his tie, slicking back

his hair, looking worried and sleep deprived. The delicate skin underneath his eyes is crumpled and purple.

“Baby, baby, I’ve got to get to the city – I’m going to be late.” He whizzes through the kitchen and lightly kisses my head, ignoring the wails coming from our child.

“Adam, I’m going to kill our baby – “

“Gotta go, honey, I love ya, give Liz my love – keys are in the thing by the uh, the whatever...”

“The console – “

“Yup, yup so I will see you tonight and we will *celebrate!*” He’s out the door in seconds, leaving me and Jack and the piece of abandoned toast sitting at the kitchen table. The baby is only six weeks old, and I’m already more drained than I ever thought was possible. I continue to hold the baby close and to rock him as I grab a bottle from the refrigerator. I shift him to my other shoulder and put the bottle in the microwave.

“Shh, shh my baby, my baby baby, shh my Jack.” He’s moving his mouth in distorted ways as he cries, he wants milk. Never enough of it. The microwave beeps and I open it hastily, drop a bit onto my wrist and pop the rubber into the baby’s mouth. He clings to it, a fleshly figure grasping at a false nipple. I slump into one of the chairs, still in my robe. My stomach is streaked with red lines, pocketed with little dimples where the flesh now hangs without purpose. I hold the baby in one arm, hold the bottle upturned to his gummy mouth. I nestle him under my breast. My breast: that barren wall between my son and myself.

Hours later, the baby is still crying, but there are no tears. His eyes are dry but his face is still red, his mouth contorted. I’m supposed to pick up Liz from the station in an hour, but I can’t find the car keys. Where had Adam said he’d put them? Not on the counter, not in the foyer. Jack screams.

“Baby, baby, shh, shh.” I bounce him on my hip and rummage through various drawers and scour a multitude of surfaces for the keys. The console! I snatch them up and slam the door behind me, baby still screaming, I lock him into his car seat, facing away from me in the back. “Please be quiet for Mommy, just be quiet for Mommy.”

The baby is still squalling when we pull up to the station. I unbuckle him and throw the diaper bag over my shoulder. I push my hair out of my eyes. Before even stepping off the asphalt, I see her standing at the station.

“Salem!” Liz waves to me from the platform, using the entirety of her arm in three overzealous motions. She bounds to the parking lot where I stand idle with my child attached to me like a leech. Dropping her bag, she throws her arms around my shoulders. Standing on her tiptoes, she caves her body away from Jack, making sure not to crush him. I hold her as tightly with my free hand as I can, and when she lets go I hold on for a beat longer.

“It’s amazing to see you. You would not *believe* my morning.” I cringe at my words. The whiny new mother.

“Oh I bet, *new Mommy.*” Liz pinches Jack’s cheek. “Haven’t seen *you* in *weeks*, little bean.” For the first time all day, the baby is silent.

“He’s been crying *all day*. I’m about to lose it.” Liz shakes her head and smiles at me in consolation.

“How’s Adam?”

I wave my hand, diaper bag still on my shoulder, “Oh you know, fine. He’s good. Helen?”

Liz’s eyes widen, “I’m *so* sorry, I forgot to tell you, she’s tied up at the hospital, couldn’t get out of call. It’s just you and me this weekend.” She pauses, “And Adam.”

“And Jack.”

“And Jack, the ‘nug.’”

“It’s so good to see you, I feel like I’ve been in some weird containment area these past few weeks. I don’t sleep, I don’t see people – I don’t even see Adam. I’m not even sure *what* I do that takes up all my time.”

Liz pinches Jack’s thigh roll, “You’re being a *Mommy*, that’s what takes up your time.” I open the car door and fling the diaper bag back onto the floor, putting Jack back in his car seat. Liz slides into the passenger seat and slaps my thigh as I put my hands on the wheel. Turning to me, she beams, “I’m so happy to see you, Sal. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks for coming, Liz. I know it wasn’t easy to get off at the clinic.”

“They’ll survive without me, couldn’t miss my best friend’s birthday.”

“Soon I cross the threshold.”

“Thirty is not a threshold. And anyway, we both go over that threshold in a few, kid.”

“Yeah, but I go first.”

“Wouldn’t want anybody else leading me along the path.”

I pull out of the parking lot and am relieved to see, as I turn my head, that Jack has fallen asleep, his face amorphous and squished on the seatbelt. No more tears for now. “Now you get to see my exciting route to the grocery store.”

“So domestic of you.”

“Who would have guessed. Honestly thank god you’re here.” I look over at Liz, “We both know I can’t cook. The baby’s been taking up all my time, so Adam and I have subsisted on baked potatoes for a month and a half.”

Liz has come prepared with a recipe for my birthday dinner, and in the grocery store she turns up her nose at the imported produce, and at the packaged bread. “God, what kind of market is this?”

“It’s a grocery store, we can’t all live in Vermont and grow our own kumquats. This is the ‘burbs.”

“Helen’s got a succulent garden thing going on our terrace.”

“Liz, you can’t eat succulents for dinner or feed them to a six-week-old baby.” I balance Jack on my hip and pick up an artichoke and sniff it, dropping it into a plastic bag. I smirk at Liz and think of the sad clump of hydrangeas that Adam brought home a week ago and how they’re already wilting in their vase. Liz shoos me away and selects the rest of the artichokes. I stand stupidly by the shopping cart with the baby clawing at my breast. I pull a bottle out of the diaper bag and shove it into his mouth. I tilt it back. His dark eyes go blank, and I look down, at the florescent-lit linoleum. The baby’s eyes have the look like Adam’s when he’s about to cum.

I unlock our front door and baby, best friend, and I tumble into the house with a mass of plastic bags filled with vegetables and pasta and pesto. We throw them on the counter and I drag the high chair into the kitchen, dropping the baby into it. I put another bottle in the microwave and watch Liz rummage through the drawers for pots, arms crossed over my chest. Liz looks up at me, squatting to reach a bottom drawer, “How’s he doing with like – “

“With bottles?” Liz nods. I sigh. “I mean, fine, I think. The baby’s fine. He’s healthy I guess, and the doctor doesn’t say anything about it, he’s normal on all the charts.” I shrug, “It’s just weird – I don’t know.”

Liz stands up, holding the pot she’s chosen by the handle, and turns the knob on the stove. Blue flames leap up to lick the black metal grates. “Like how do you mean?” She’s looking at me, and I’m reminded of all the times she has given me this look, her look, our look. We give each

other this look to mark change, like the notches our dads used to put on the doorframes each time we would hit a growth spurt.

“I don’t know, I feel like every time the doctor asks me about the bottles and the formula there’s like this unspoken thing,” I pause. The microwave beeps and I let the bottle sit there for a minute, “like I was selfish to do what I did so young, not thinking about my future or a baby or any of it, or whatever.”

“Your body, your choice, Sal. Do you regret it?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Liz stirs the pasta. I screw the rubber nipple on the bottle and plug the baby’s mouth, “I’m just saying, I feel guilty sometimes.”

“Looks like he’s doing just fine.” I shrug and sit with the baby, titling the bottle up while Liz cooks. She turns around from the stirring, “What time does Adam get home?”

“It’s going to be a late night, I don’t know. They’ve been having him stay in the city long nights this week.”

Liz gives me a look, turning around from the stove, still stirring “It’s your *birthday* Salem. His wife just had a *baby*.”

“And that’s why I have you here. To celebrate.” I feel layers of time melt away as we talk. I cannot help but feel envious as I listen to Liz’s and Helen’s life. Even in domesticity they have remained untethered, traveling often, backpacking on the weekends, spending time off with each other. They support and feed off of one another, hold each other up. One does not take from the other without replacement, it is a symbiotic relationship.

The dinner is ready by eight, with no sign of Adam. “Should we wait?” Liz is particular about the food she eats, always has been. It’s the one thing she’s snobbish about.

“No, no, he was supposed to be home an hour ago, let me just...” The baby is asleep in his high chair. “Let me just put the baby to bed and we can start, open a bottle of wine.”

“Need help?” Liz wipes down the counters and looks back at me as I unclip Jack from his high chair.

“No, I got it.” I carry the baby upstairs to his room. I set him in his crib and look out the window but still don’t see Adam’s car. This is how they get you. Set you up in a little dollhouse, tie you to a child, return only for feeding and watering and sex. Like a pet. Minus the sex. I close the door to the baby’s room, monitor in hand. I tiptoe down the stairs and pray for silence from the monitor.

Liz has already set the table for three, me at the head. “Well doesn’t this look fancy? We’re used to eating off of napkins lately.” I sit down in my seat, Liz beams as she plates the food.

“It *is* a special occasion.” She sets two plates down and opens the warming drawer, sliding the last plate in for Adam for later. I set the monitor down next to my plate and uncork a bottle of wine. Liz raises her glass, “To my oldest friend.”

“So happy you’re here, Lizzie, I can’t say it enough.” The pasta is amazing, a welcome change from my half-raw baked potatoes.

Liz takes a bite and wrinkles her nose. “Too much salt.

“I can’t tell - I’m just so glad not to be eating mush. Adam’s going to love this, he’s so sick of potatoes.”

“He can deal. You do enough.” Except for the one thing that would make our baby the healthiest.

As the night wears on, Liz settles into her chair, assumes a hard look. I know this pose. It’s her argument pose. I used to sit at the kitchen table in her childhood house and watch her argue with her father in this position. Daughter rising up against paternal force. She developed a stance

strong enough to withstand this unnatural power struggle. The Titan Cronus ate his children. She refused to be devoured. And here she sat in my kitchen, so many years after triumph. “Have you thought about getting back to it?”

The pasta is half-twirled on my fork, “You mean the gallery?”

Liz shrugs, “It’s a stepping stone, at least.” I look down at the pasta, making patterns in the pesto on my plate.

“To what, Lizzie? To a doctorate? Isn’t it a little late for that?”

Liz sighs, resigned. She leans forward in her chair, releasing her stance. “I just will never forget that night when you called me.”

“I know.”

“Three in the morning.” We laugh. I remember that night too. It was sophomore year, I had just kicked a boy out of my dorm room. It was so late. I called Liz to ground myself, to bring myself back to what mattered. My academics. Her friendship. My future.

“I was so impressed, I was just like messing around beating my head against a wall studying biochem or something, and you were on the phone telling me you wanted to be a *curator*. I had no idea what I was doing with my life and there you were at three in the morning talking about PhD programs.” The baby wails on the monitor. I don’t move. What Liz says next is so quiet I barely hear her, “I just don’t want you to throw it away.”

I clear the plates, the baby’s crying gets louder and louder on the monitor. Liz pushes her chair back, “Let me help, Sal. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“No, no, it’s really ok.” Weak.

I turn on the faucet and let the water run hot over my hands, over the plates. “You know, Helen and I are talking about adoption.” I feel a twinge. A child is the one thing I thought Liz would never have, I’m not sure why. I thought I was the only one who could take on this role, the only one of us capable. She would have a child. She would have the perfect family.

“That’s wonderful Lizzie. You and Helen’ll both be great mothers, you really will.”

“It’s scary, but I think we’re ready.” I nod and put the glasses in the dishwasher. “I was watching Helen the other day with one of the little girls that came into my clinic, and I just knew then that that’s what our family needs.”

I wish suddenly that I had had a daughter to raise, to make as strong as my best friend. The baby is still crying on the monitor over the sound of the running faucet, I reach for it and look back at Liz, who is still clearing the table. “I’ve got to get the baby, just give me a minute.”

“No problem, I’ve got this covered, no worries.”

I walk upstairs and open the door. Jack’s wailing intensifies. He’s in his crib, feet kicking, hands balled in some pitiful dance of desperation and inexplicable misery. I hold him to my breast and his mouth moves futilely on my shirt where my dry nipple mocks him underneath my bra. It is my one saddest victory to deny my child my body. The spider scars are evidence of my selfish protection. I hold him in my arms and rock him to sleep, gently, gently. His hands stop flailing and his eyes close again.

I tread back downstairs, monitor in hand. Liz is sprawled on the couch in the living room, asleep. I smile and pull a blanket over her, planning to wake her up for the morning train. Adam comes in late, and I’m dozing, sitting on the floor and leaning on the couch. He drops his briefcase in the hall and sheepishly puts a cake box on the kitchen table before coming into the living room and reaching apologetically for my hands. “Hey, I’m so sorry it’s late, babe.” He pulls me up to my feet and walks with me to the foyer, where he kisses my forehead, “Happy birthday.” He smells familiar. His suit is wrinkled, his shoes scratched from a long day in the city. I kiss him softly under the eye, where the purple has darkened from even this morning. “I’m sorry I missed Liz before

she conked, you guys have fun?”

“We did.” He tells me he is sorry. “It’s not a big deal,” I hear myself say. We walk up the stairs. I forget to tell him about the leftover food in the warming drawer. He goes into the bathroom to brush his teeth, and comes out again, leaning on the doorframe. He watches me as I change. I turn around, facing away from him, hiding the ugly stretch marks. The scars are not the only lines on my body anymore. He speaks through a mouthful of toothpaste, his voice is gravelly, performative. “Hey, what do you think about a little,” he spits into the sink, going back into the bathroom, “a little birthday fun tonight?” He sits on the bed, tries to pull me into him, unintentionally touching my belly. I pull away to the dresser and get out a sweatshirt.

“I don’t know.” My voice trails off. I crawl onto my side and pull the three blankets up around me. I tell Adam I’m too tired for him. I know he is too, but men want what they want. We do it anyway. I’m silent, as always. I wonder if Liz ever says no to Helen. I wonder if when Liz goes home tomorrow, exhausted, if she will still want to feel Helen, to touch her and be touched. I wonder if they still hold each other like they did my twenty first year. If they make each other feel good without the power trip, if Liz lets Helen touch her fleshy parts. If Liz ever plays bone conductor.

He doesn’t finish - hasn’t in weeks, not since we had Jack. I haven’t either but it’s harder for me. I am raw, it hurts after the baby. Nobody tells you that, how ravaged you are afterwards. The female body is a miraculous thing but it is not invincible. I roll off of Adam and onto my side of the bed. I’m so tired. It slips out quietly, and he pretends not to hear but I know he does: “I don’t know what you want from me.” But I do know.

Boys love bones. We’re supposed to be small, to not take up space, to be unthreatening, to speak softly. A mother must be soft in all the right places, must give her whole self. Jack squalls on the baby monitor. It’s three in the morning and all I want is sleep.

Boys also love breasts. Babies especially. But I cannot give this part of my body to my child. They are not for him. I get out of bed, pad to my son’s room. I pick up my child and hold his hand and take his balled fist and run it along my collarbone, down my sternum to my ribs. I stop at my stretched out belly. The female body is an illusion, a medium. A prop. My baby will soon discover this. He may already have done so: the scars tell all.