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## My Sister and Other Big Things

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DARCY CASEY

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# MY SISTER AND OTHER BIG THINGS

- *Runner-Up: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest* -

MY SISTER HAS a superhuman tolerance for pain. Not the kind of braggy-empty tolerance you hear men throwing around at a bar about how they didn't flinch when they got their last tattoo or how when they shot themselves in the foot during their last hunting trip, they took the bullet out themselves, yessah, using their grandfather's own Swiss Army knife.

Although she can tell those stories too. Like when we had braces and I cried about the ache in my jaw while she crunched carrots between her freed molars, her ache shrugged off as a side effect of teeth putting down new roots. Or like when she got the Baddest Bunion and had her foot-bones shaved and broken in two places only to be bolted back together whole. After two days of crawling along the floor dragging her bruised-blackened foot behind her, she took one oxycodone. Only one, because the coming-down shakes were seizure-bad. Only one, because she may have wanted another, and the blood pumping through our veins is laced with addiction.

But her tolerance is more than bar-talk teeth-talk foot-talk. It's tolerance for the kind of pain that bends you over and finds out what you're made of

at the very core of your being. The kind that presses your face toward the ground and as you feel your fibers giving in, demands of you, are you birch or oak? Steel or web? Will you break or bend?

At nearly six feet, my sister is tall. At three times my width, my sister is fat.

Her size makes sick demands of her, like having to check the weight limitations of chairs under the gaze of curious restaurant diners and then walking away, hungry, because there were no booths and the tag said 300 pounds. Like last Thanksgiving, while our family argued about outdoor survival and Dad, not comprehending nutritional deficiencies, insisted my sister would last longest because her body would eat fat for weeks. Her, putting down her next bite of sunflower-yellow squash, saying nothing but probably, maybe, thinking about survival.

Her tolerance is the persistent but barely perceived tolerance for taking up space in places that try hard to reject her like skin rejects a splinter.

My sister tries not being fat. Younger, there were concerns about bullies and how fast she could run. Older, there are concerns about health and the longevity of her life. Our family tries to help her with our metastasizing advice. We tell her things like *cut out carbs* and sometimes give her real gifts too, like Atkins cookbooks and bariatric surgery pamphlets. The thin, smiling women printed on these books and papers promise a new life but don't deliver. My cousin's advice, voiced with the authority of a blessing, was given on a chilly, mosquito-bitten evening in northern Maine through the jaundiced glow of a flashlight. Eat only what and when your sister eats.

These words rested heavy in the air, hovering like fog but we were so far from the ocean. My sister blinked at me, taking in my lack of bones-skin-muscle, and ate a Slim Jim, which was okay because I was eating one too.

Growing up, I worried about the number of freckles on my pale cheeks and whether my right eye was drooping (it was). My sister, her worries proportionately larger than mine, hid them behind curtains of angst about friends and her future major (it would be biology). None of us could realize that the sum of a woman is more than her outward appearance, so my sister absorbed our criticism-disguised-as-help, our words sharp and exact like a doctor's scalpel, cutting quick through individual layers and so honed she could pretend to ignore the flaying.

Going out one evening I tossed outfit after outfit on my bed and each discarded set of clothes produced more tears, more disquiet, until at last frustration and those final five pounds overwhelmed me and I gritted my braces-free teeth and lamented my fatness. My sister looked at me from beside the pile of clothes that, should she try to wear them, could barely be pulled to her knees. With tear-free eyes and a cat-quiet voice she said she thought I was beautiful and also not fat. As she adjusted the waistband of her jeans and looked down at her phone, I looked at her and felt thin and also small.