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How to Disappear

Caitlin McGill

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CAITLIN MCGILL

HOW TO DISAPPEAR

I SWING A leg over my bike and fly past restaurant after restaurant, imagining a warm pizza crust touching my lips, flour dusting my tongue, mozzarella seeping into the spaces between my teeth. My yoga mat knocks against my back as I ride over cratered roads, inhaling the scent of garlic and cheese, basil and thyme, fresh focaccia and melted butter. *Chocolate. Cinnamon. Nutmeg.* I imagine pulling over, walking inside and buying a piece, a pie, a whole tray. I imagine this until I have ridden right past those smells and into another Boston neighborhood. *Soy. Teriyaki.* Fried dough crawls from Brazilian and Colombian ovens. I envy people sitting outside and eating whatever they like. I push on, muscles aching. A perfectly portioned meal awaits me at home. *Do not pull over.*

I congratulate myself for resisting, unable to see how this obsession might've developed from something in my past—and even from a history that predates my existence. Something that's been unspoken for too long, that's finally showing itself in my body.

I'm a twenty-four-year-old grad student who stands before a class of undergraduates each day, attempting to focus on their words but often dis-

tracted by my empty stomach and the diuretics waiting inside my bag. I ignore the fact that my peers have watched my body wane and likely wondered, *Is she okay?* I ignore the fact that my family is probably wondering too. And I recoil when my boyfriend David's lips slide across my stomach and neck like fire. My seared skin triggers memories of Carlos's hands, pushing my mind toward the controllable scale, the controllable bulge of my belly. My buried past and my restriction intertwining, conflating, impossible to distinguish.

I am baffled by my inability to stop biking and pull over, by this addiction that's been building in me for years and finally began controlling me a year ago. No less than 1,200 calories a day; any less, I've read, is not safe. Half a cup of cereal in unsweetened almond milk. Hummus and carrots, spinach thirsty for dressing. An afternoon apple to avoid cramps. Tilapia with a fistful of broccoli and brown rice but no oil and maybe—*maybe*—nonfat yogurt or plain popcorn or sugar-free Jell-O at night. I only eat less when my daily allowance depletes—after ice cream runs with my roommates or barhopping with David. While chocolate melts on my tongue or alcohol burns my esophagus, I try not to worry about numbers, but I usually can't stop the thoughts. I conceal them with a smile, secretly avoid costly activities. Before and after the rare days when I pass the daily limit—1,700 calories; enough, I calculate, to maintain my weight—I eat less. I save calories like money. If I withdraw too many on Saturday, I deposit extra on Sunday.

After I lock up my bike and lean my yoga mat beside my bed, I call a

bakery and ask, “How many ounces in each slice of your focaccia? And calories in each ounce? Slices in each loaf?” I don’t mind asking over the phone. No need to hide thin limbs. I never actually buy the bread.

I spend an hour searching for nutritional information at the restaurant where I have upcoming plans. I guess at the exact amount of avocado and mayo and fried eggs on sandwiches. I overestimate. *Don’t forget to peer under the bread and count the bacon slices*, I remind myself. *Or maybe just avoid the fatty bacon altogether*. I’ve grown so skilled at estimating calories based on menu images and descriptions that I could probably guess the number of pickles in a fifty-ounce jar.

Every night I convince myself I don’t want to lose more, yet when I stand on the scale and learn the numbers have dropped—130 to 120, 120 to 110—my heartbeat slows, the protruding skin around my navel seems to flatten, and my shoulders drop away from my ears. I don’t listen to friends’ hints—“Don’t you want the whole sandwich, Skinny Minnie?”

I try but often fail to ignore the cautioning voice in my head—*Don’t you miss your thick thighs, your round butt?* I stare at my profile and push my hands against my flat belly and think of the numbers two years ago. How staggering the decline is for a 5’6” woman who never needed to lose, who cannot determine where this suffering began.

• • •

WHEN MY GRANDMOTHER, Claire, was a child in 1930s New Jersey, she

tried to be invisible. Her mother, Lillian, beat her. Left her bruised. Oiled her hair and strangled her in formal clothing and then forced her to go to school, where children taunted her. Perhaps when Lillian noticed Claire seeking refuge in her father, Dave, she realized her husband might've loved their daughter more than her, that Claire was dangerously beautiful. She beat Claire more.

One night, as they sat around their dinner table listening to Lillian harass Dave, Dave broke his silence. Threw his plate to the ceiling and watched it all crash down on them: the spaghetti and meatballs, the china my mother would inherit, Lillian's words. Claire and Dave escaped to a five-star restaurant and dined over prime rib, double chocolate cake, delicious, unbridled laughter.

As soon as Claire met a man who found her desirable enough, she married him. My mother, Ellen, was born three years later.

But Claire's husband wasn't as loving as her father. When my mother was twelve, her father told her mother, *I don't want to be married to you anymore*. Claire moved her children—my mother and my uncle—to a new town with a new man. She had long been measuring her worth in men, prizing her tiny waist and eye for fashion, but after her first husband left—after years of him criticizing her small breasts, insisting she wear false lashes like the women he secretly visited—her need for control must've grown. It was 1968; she was thirty-nine with no job, no money of her own. To be beautiful and to have that desirability affirmed—to make visible her exterior allure and to make invisible her interior pain—this, it seems, was

her primary means for survival.

This, eventually, would become my means for survival, too.

She didn't speak about her husband's abandonment, her mother's beatings; she didn't speak about the sound of the incinerator when, before moving in with her second husband, she threw her children's old toys and class pictures down the trash chute. Only comments about women in magazines, numbers on scales, clothes she and my mother would look beautiful in. Dangerous diet pills were gaining popularity among mostly white, middle-class American women who, with an average body mass index (BMI) of 25, longed to resemble ultra-thin fashion icons like Twiggy, whose BMI was less than 15.

My grandmother could control her hairstyle and makeup, her jewelry and clothes, the number on the scale. But how much did those fixations end up controlling *her*? How much of herself did she lose—and never come to know?

• • •

THE COOL BOSTON morning lures me out to the porch, away from the kitchen. As I sit, my aching legs exhume yesterday's bike-ride home from yoga, yesterday's dreams of pulling over and grabbing a slice, a pie, a whole tray. Squirrels pounce and glide along trembling power lines. While I'm writing and listening to the birds instead of my grumbling stomach, my mother calls.

I stare at my phone long enough to risk missing her. Words have been steadily flowing from my fingers; I don't want to be interrupted. Still, I answer. I long to grant my mother access to this fleeting moment when my thoughts meander freely. But during the six years I remained with Carlos, my ability to conceal grew so strong that now it overpowers me. I never told my family that when I first tried to leave Carlos, he swallowed a handful of pills. I never told them that when he rammed his fist into my car door, I flinched, eyes closed. That whenever he jumped out of my idling vehicle, I yelled for him to get back in, rocks flying from his unpredictable hands and ricocheting off the door like the jacks I'd played with as a kid. I never told them about my stubborn attempts to stop him—to regain control. Instead I hoarded it all inside: the stolen speakers and watches we pawned to make rent, his father's belt, the gang bullet that grazed his fourteen-year-old calf.

Even now, two years after leaving Carlos, I would rather perpetuate this silence than admit my suffering.

“Hey, Momma.” My first spoken words of the day ripple out. “What're you up to?”

A day off, a day away from patients and other tired nurses and strict hospital regulations that often wilt her words. A coffee, sitting in their Miami sunroom with Sammy—the dog Carlos rescued, and my parents eventually adopted.

I swallow the last of my own coffee. Think about my empty belly. Know my mother is thinking of hers. My openness has already begun to disappear.

“Cherishing my day off with Sammy Boy,” she adds. “How's my girl?”

The sun spills through porch rails and stripes my arms, violet morning glories twisting up the beams like spiral stairs, their tissue-thin petals the color of raw eggplant. By noon, the flowers will disappear. Tomorrow morning new blooms will replace the old.

I tell my mother I've been on the porch working, and then she begins recounting last night's phone calls with my grandmother, Claire, and my sister, Lindsay. Old jokes and memories unfurl. She speaks, too, of Lindsay's new psychologist, of the body image that has plagued her since childhood, of how different we were as kids. I picture ten-year-old Lindsay wearing noise-cancelling ear protectors, hiding in the bathroom as my father and I drilled holes and sawed wood, renovated the kitchen.

"You know," my mother says, "her body image issues aren't so different from mine."

The power lines shudder. My stomach growls. I remain silent.

I think of my father uncharacteristically verbalizing concern when he picked me up from the airport a few months ago: *You're looking pretty slim there, Caitie Bear.*

I swatted his words away and talked about biking, walking, playing in Boston—excuses for the loss.

But lately, swatting away the cautioning voice in my head seems impossible.

• • •

A MEMORY I cannot shake: My mother and sister and me trying on clothes in my sister's bedroom, standing before her mirrored closet doors. I'm ten, maybe eleven. Lindsay is twelve or thirteen. My shirt's on and then off, and then I try on a dress so I ditch the pants, too. My mother and sister do the same. The room is dim. Our golden silhouettes wave from the glass like holograms.

Lindsay's legs might be thicker than mine, her cheeks fuller. Her torso seems wider, too, but from the side, her stomach appears flat. As she looks to her feet, hiding from her reflection and holding both hands over her belly, she sneaks glances of her naturally thin mother and sister and then looks back down at her stomach, eyebrows furrowing as she likely wonders, *Why am I so fat?* She isn't. But in dressing rooms, despite how our mother tries to hide size tags, Lindsay often spots the number and then compares it to mine. She also spots the clothing line label—**CHUBBY**—stamped inside.

As I turn to inspect my profile in those mirrored doors, I'm mostly blind to Lindsay's feelings. All I see is my pale and freckled bulging stomach. I don't see my muscular thighs or toned biceps.

In five or six years I will start to see men as mirrors, too—Carlos's longing and pain, and my ability to temporarily assuage it, affirming my worth.

I glance at my flat chest and then again at my stomach. Push my hands against my flesh. *Just go away.* I don't think I'm *fat*, but my friends are tan and busty and their tummies don't seem to bulge. *Why can't I look like them?*

Then my mother turns to the side, examines her profile in the mirror. "Thank goodness," she says. "It's not just me! I hate that part of my stomach,

too.”



NEARLY 8,000 YEARS before my mother and sister and I stood before those closet doors, Anatolians—modern-day Turks—made the first-known mirrors from volcanic glass.

Did the Anatolians recoil and shriek, or did they stare and touch their fingers to the glass, trying to understand who that being standing before them was? When did they finally realize, *That’s me?*

Four thousand years later (around 2,000 BC), most likely in Mesopotamia, balance scales—two plates suspended from either side of a beam—were used to weigh goods. The scales eventually appeared in Egypt, Greece, and Rome, where measuring relied on counterweights to determine mass, making all weight relative.

But in the late 1700s, British inventor Richard Salter conceived the spring scale. By hanging an item on a hook attached to the spring, one could measure pressure, *absolute* weight.

Then the late 1800s brought accurate, self-indicating industry scales. And by the 1940s, electronics entered the picture; instruments attached to scales increased accuracy, though the actual measuring still relied on springs. Bathroom scales, however more clunky and inaccurate than today’s digital devices, invaded American homes and bodies and minds.



ON MY BOSTON porch, I'm still holding the phone in one numb hand and warming the other beneath my thigh, watching squirrels balance on power lines. Sunlight crawls across my legs, goose bumps disappearing from my shins. I'm always cold. And I haven't menstruated in more than six months. I relish these tangible signs while pretending they aren't warnings.

I can't see that I've done this before; I relished Carlos's trembling hands tightening around my wrists, his tears softening our skin, the amethyst blooms I imagined appearing the next day—rare, perceivable, mirrored proof of my distress. When my body perceived danger—Carlos's fists penetrating walls, clothes sagging around my limbs—I stiffened, withdrew into my armor, emotion frozen in my dissociating mind, my developing brain. Temporary mental relief as I hid inside my immobilized body.

My mother continues: "It wasn't easy for Lindsay growing up. You didn't have trouble with your weight, and I was too thin."

I don't let my mother into my head where I'm chiding myself for yesterday's low-fat ice cream, the sweet cookie dough that crumbled between my teeth, the chocolate chips that melted on my tongue. I stare at my thighs and replay David's questions—*Don't you want a little more?* When my mother visited last month, she eyed my portions and limbs—*You exercising too much?*—her hands lingering around my waist. Did *anorexia* dance on her tongue as it does mine? Like David, she never explicitly asked.

Sometimes, as I lie awake calculating my BMI again and again, I find

myself thinking, *Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to confirm it, to identify the wound, determine where to tie the tourniquet, patch the hole, begin regeneration.*

I don't let my mother into my head where I'm trying to convince myself that one day I'll finally grab a slice at the pizzeria I pass every day *just because I feel like it*, or that one morning when I'm buying coffee I'll grab one of those taunting pains au chocolat. But I know I won't let my desire win, won't waste the calories on that morning, that afternoon, that night. I will *wait wait wait* for another morning when I'm hungrier and the desire is stronger and I don't have plans to eat out that same week. An entire summer of this reasoning has passed. I have not eaten the pizza. Nor the pain au chocolat.

• • •

IN THE 1930S, when Claire's mother was forcing her into intolerable clothes, the then-leading household scale line released ads for their product—a coveted addition to the American bathroom. “The helpful psychology of weighing daily,” the Health-O-Meter ads read. “If your Health-O-Meter shows you are gaining, you eat less—the memory of what it told subconsciously dulls your appetite . . .”

A decade later, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company published its first ideal height and weight chart. If, according to this chart, you were overweight, the insurance company could deny your application. “Ideal”

became a concept you could and should measure.

In digital devices and mirrors. In bulging bellies and men.

• • •

“I WORRY ABOUT you getting too thin,” my mother finally says, filling my silence.

I imagine her studying my photos, wondering if my cheekbones have ever been so prominent. “You shouldn’t,” I say as I lean into the porch rail, searching for more sunlight. “Really—I’m fine.”

“I had my own troubles with borderline eating disorders, you know. Don’t you remember me dragging you girls to my aerobics class every day when you were little?”

As a kid, I told friends my mother was a “health nut.” I was aware of her particular regimen that excluded soda and chips and fast food, but it never seemed peculiar. Neither did the POISON game I played when spotting junk food in supermarkets. The reality adults construct for children often seems like the only one possible; the thought that a different reality could even exist rarely crossed my young mind.

My friends’ mothers had different rules and habits than mine, but I still never considered my mother’s behaviors *disordered*. Her rigid restriction seemed normal enough. I never knew my 5’2” mother had once weighed barely one hundred pounds.

“I’d lose a pound or two and then want to lose more,” she says. “And I

ate like I was on some extreme diet. Your father never wanted to talk about it, so we didn't."

I think of my mother's weeknight dinners: peanut butter and jelly on a whole wheat English muffin. My father, her husband of thirty-three years, rarely acknowledges these habits. Perhaps he fears she'll address his fluctuating weight. Perhaps he is bound by patriarchal codes he unconsciously learned long ago, in 1940s South Carolina and 1960s Vietnam where, as a young man and young medic, he might've learned to sequester emotions, to equate seeking help with shame.

I consider my own dinners of broccoli and a hundred-calorie veggie burger and barely half a cup of rice, and I wonder how much I learned from my mother—how much she learned from hers. How much we all learn from each other's silence.

Maybe we all disappear into dysfunction. Into mirrors and scales we beg to reflect our worth. Into people we need to show us we are needed.

Every morning I wake and immediately touch my belly, feel for fullness, hope for emptiness. For proof that I'm in control. I can't see that what I have yet to speak aloud endangers me still. That the mirrors endangering me all along might've preceded Carlos, might've even led me to him.

I exercise nearly every day and though I know what it means to listen to your body, I don't. I count feeling ravished and faint as a success instead of a warning. Conceal from myself the seriousness of my waning body. Though the diminishing number on the scale relieves me, it simultaneously strangles the cautioning voice in my head. *Pull over. Eat that protein bar before*

biking home. Tell your parents where those dents in your car door really came from.

• • •

As I LIE in bed replaying my mother's morning confessions—*I had my own troubles, you know*—I open my web browser to articles about BMI and malnutrition. An eighty-calorie, low-fat yogurt and three strawberries sit beside my thigh.

I savor each berry, and read: underfed bodies breed underfed brains.

After failing to sleep, I return to my laptop and read of corsets tied so tight one cannot breathe, the introduction of the calorie in the 1800s. I study Renoir's 1887 "The Large Bathers"—plump, nude beauties lounging beside a lake, round bellies and thick legs brushed into desirable shapes. What happened to the allure of full figures boasting wealth and abundant diets and functioning brains? When did plump shift from a sign of vitality to one that elicits—or reflects—disgust?

• • •

CLAIRE DIDN'T WEAR corsets, but she idolized Hollywood's golden-era women and was born two months after Audrey Hepburn. The two grew up side by side, Claire dancing before the television, Hepburn twirling on screen, their shadows chasing each other across the set.

One afternoon when I was nine or ten, I heard Hepburn playing Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, trying to perfect her English—“The rain . . . in Spain . . . stays mainly . . . in the plain.” I ran to the living room where my grandmother and sister sat watching. Hepburn’s tiny waist and slender limbs seemed perfect, a dream. I had no idea that Hepburn had been severely malnourished during her adolescence in WWII, that her thin limbs might’ve resulted from an unwilling starvation I’d never experienced.

Around the same time, on another day when my grandmother was babysitting, she cooked challah French toast and then I danced around the house with a full belly. She was likely sitting in my father’s recliner and watching her favorite soap operas: *Bold and the Beautiful*, *Guiding Light*, *The Young and the Restless*. Grandma attended all my dance recitals and competitions, drove me to ballet and modern and tap classes and told me how talented I was. I never doubted her love. I leaped and pirouetted and shimmied through the living room, telling Grandma maybe I could be a professional dancer someday.

“Well sure, Honey, you’re very good. But you’d have to be *much* thinner.” Her declaration seemed matter-of-fact. “You’d have to lose at least ten pounds.”

• • •

A WEEK AFTER my mother finally spoke the words aloud—I *worry about you getting too thin*—I find myself on the porch, on the phone, again: my moth-

er describing her extreme dieting once more, the sun licking my arms, my stomach grumbling. I'm waiting for more time to pass so I won't eat breakfast too early, won't be hungry for lunch too soon or eat more than planned. I've already decided the number of crackers, quarter cups of strawberries, and teaspoons of seasoning on my tilapia that I'll eat today, tomorrow, the rest of the week and part of the next. I tell myself I just need to make sure I don't gain, but if I lose a pound or two in the process, I still think: *Must not gain*. I keep a tight calorie budget, grow my savings. If I withdraw 500, I deposit 1,000. I step on the scale more times a day than I let myself count.

"I really never knew you had eating disorders, Mom . . ." I tuck my free hand beneath my thigh and think of the wardrobe that leads to Narnia, the door that is and isn't there. Step through and don't look back. "Anyway, how's Grandma?"

"Volunteering at the senior center again," my mother says. "Can't believe my mother will be eighty-five in a few days."

I'll miss Grandma's celebration in Miami, miss the chocolate cake Lindsay will make, envision eating it and nearly send my tongue into spasms. But I will not go out and buy a piece. I'll dream about it—literally dream of eating cake and brownies and croissants—and tell myself that will suffice.

"Alright, Caitie-boo, I better get ready for yoga now."

I inhale—deeply enough so I can hear it—and exhale morning air through parted lips, blowing away my mother's words like a coat of dirt from a closed old book. I tell her I love her and hang up, dust fogging my view.



A FEW WEEKS later, I learn my grandmother is in the hospital. Her eighty-fifth birthday is only two days away. I'm riding the bus at three in the afternoon and have not eaten lunch. Despite my efforts to pretend I'm not exhausted, I keep thinking of all our mirrors and scales, wondering if our obsession is trivial, if life is too transient, if I spend too much energy on not living. Eventually I'll realize these are the very thoughts that compelled me to finally leave Carlos. That my adolescent brain and my hungry brain might not be so different. But right now, even my grandmother's hospitalization, even my curiosity about what now seems like an inheritance, can't stop my restriction.

Aside from a minor upper respiratory condition and chronic cough, my grandmother has always been in near-perfect health.

"She drove herself to urgent care," my mother tells me. "Then an ambulance took her to the hospital."

Pneumonia, high blood pressure, low heart rate, irregular EKG results. She stays in the hospital for two nights and I call and my mother visits her and we all tremble with the image of Grandma, our resilient, unshakable Grandma, in a hospital bed, our bodies the power lines upon which our fears pounce.

I wish I could be there. But I'm secretly glad that I don't have to see her—that I can momentarily ignore my fear. I call, cover my eyes in her

well-spoken words, her poised voice a blindfold I tie tightly around my head. *She'll be fine.*

SEVERAL WEEKS LATER, I dip below 110. At 5'6", and compared to the 135 I weighed two years ago, I am at least ten pounds underweight. Charts claim that my BMI should be at least 19. Mine's 18.1. I haven't weighed this little since I was fourteen or fifteen.

I'm constantly and unwillingly snapping at my mother on the phone, at David whenever he's near. He wants a hug. An explanation. But I am frozen inside my shell again, incapable of answering his requests. When I lie beside him, my mind has so little space left I can't decide if I should shower then eat, eat then shower, coffee then work then eat, not eat, eat while showering, or just lie there until my brain melts. I turn away from him and think, *When you rub my shoulders and trace your fingers up my thigh and I tell you I can't breathe, it's not because I don't want you.*

I check and re-check "ideal" weight charts—120-144 for a 5'6" woman—and recognize how dangerous my 110 might be.

I don't realize that this could be what I've been looking for all along, that I unconsciously created another mirror—another tangible, fixable, luminous wound.

MAYBE MY GRANDMOTHER'S hospitalization or my insurgent snapping or the essays I'm reading scare me into it, but by summer's end I'm compelled to search for psychological services at my graduate school.

And I can't stop reading this passage: "It is perfectly possible—indeed, it is far from uncommon," James Baldwin writes, "to go to bed one night, or wake up one morning, or simply walk through a door one has known all one's life, and discover, between inhaling and exhaling, that the self one has sewn together with such effort is all dirty rags, is unusable, is gone: and out of what raw material will one build a self again?"

I save the office number in my phone. Eventually, I call.

• • •

AFTER ONE MONTH, my psychologist finally asks: "Could you, maybe, begin to *think* about getting rid of the scale? Just *think* about it?"

I hesitate. Squeeze my hands together in my lap.

After two weeks of imagining the bathroom without the device—of imagining not weighing myself several times a day—I approach my roommates. They run to the bathroom, extract the scale, and stash it away. I never see it again.

I retreat to my room, collapse onto my bed and cry, trying to remember the last time I felt such unbridled euphoria. Perhaps when Carlos and I last took ecstasy. No over-thinking. No hardened shell. Only the tangible sensation of liquid licking my cheeks, eyelids swelling, the sudden ability to breathe.

One month later, I tell my sister. She tells me about her bingeing. Vomiting. The unrelenting temptation to relapse. I'm surprised by her confession,

though perhaps I shouldn't be. Suddenly our pasts don't seem so different, our disclosures breeding a new intimacy—a welcome but unfamiliar resemblance and relief. One not born from control, but from relinquishment.

“Have you told David?” she asks.

I tell her I have. “He’s glad I’m seeing someone . . . and sorry he didn’t pry more.”

“How ‘bout Mom?”

The next day I speak to my mother for two hours, tell her everything I’ve been discussing with my psychologist. She’s happy we’re talking. The door is open and though I don’t want to shut it, I don’t think I could if I tried.

I think of those action-movie scenes when bank robbers traverse vault doors. Will ours eventually descend?

“I became addicted to losing, too,” I say. “I think it has a lot to do with Grandma and you and Lindsay and . . . now I’m just determined to understand it all.” I don’t mention Carlos—don’t mention the weed and cocaine, the pockmarked walls and trembling knife in his tipsy hand. I don’t even think to. I can’t even remember what he threatened with the knife: his life, or mine?

Silence. Then: “What did I do to my girls?”

• • •

WHEN DAVID AND I fly to Miami for Thanksgiving the following month, I

anticipate excessive eating and try not to deposit too much into my calorie savings. I rationalize the gaining with workouts, tell myself it's all muscle. My mother and sister don't pry until I call them into my room where I'm crying and ask, "How do you handle all the food?" They, too, stash away the scale.

We don't tell Grandma yet. She's been stable since her hospitalization months ago, but her physical strength has waned. Plus, we know what she might say. *I'd sell an organ to look like you again!*

When she arrives on Christmas morning, I pretend the cinnamon crumb cake doesn't scare me, squeeze David's hand beneath the table. When a person is denied something—or, when a person denies *herself* something—for so long, she is bound to become rabid at the sight, at the first bite, of the forbidden.

Back in Boston, my psychologist keeps asking, coaxing, listening. *Really* listening. I can't seem to stop sharing my mother's and grandmother's histories. I admit I used to weigh myself at two, three, four in the morning, but now that the scale is gone, I rely on glass.

"Yes," I say, "I even study my stomach when I use the bathroom in the middle of the night."

And at some point she begins asking about my romantic life—my romantic past. I mention sweet David, my snapping and withholding. I mention my old boyfriend, Carlos, the drugs, the amethyst blooms, his father's abuse, but I rush past all of that. *She doesn't need to know about him*, I think. *I simply need help with the present.*

“Remind me . . .” she persists, “how old were you when you met?”

“Sixteen,” I say, “and he was twenty-one . . .” I tell her about the holes in his walls. His bloody knuckles. The hazy memory of his hands around my neck. Mine around his wrists. His tears. The crimson diagonal my unfiled nail drew across his cheek. His laughter—“Now I look thug, like Nelly.”

Temporary mental relief from glass reflections and my bulging stomach as I hid inside Carlos’s longing and anger and tears.

Eventually I’ve told her nearly everything I can recall about those six years, and we begin to talk about Carlos as much as we talk about control. I don’t ask why.

I can’t see that, in Carlos’s absence, I searched for more affirming reflections. That I created more conflict to conceal. That I’ve been trading mirrors for years.

“Your prefrontal cortex would’ve still been developing when you were with Carlos,” she says. “You were very, very young.” She peels off her scarf and folds it in her lap, next to her clipboard.

“I guess you’re right . . .” I say, remembering all the times Carlos and I parked my station wagon on the Macy’s parking lot roof during his break, all the times I climbed onto his lap and he rocked me while staring at my clothed back. The tissues tucked between my legs while I drove home. I often worried his dress pants would be stained when he went back inside to sell women’s shoes. “I guess that was more than eight years ago now.”

Heat crawls from the baseboard beside my boots. Bare branches scrape the fifth-floor window. From my armchair, I can see the building where I

taught my first writing class.

“So you met when you were sixteen, and he was twenty-one,” she repeats, as though she needs me to hear it again and again. The creasing skin around her eyes feels like an apology. Maybe it’s mine. “And how old were you when you were using cocaine?”

“Eighteen? Maybe seventeen?”

A sigh. “Decision-making under those circumstances would’ve been extremely difficult. And if no adult—aside from Carlos—knew what was going on . . .” she says, “I can imagine how easy it would’ve been for those behaviors to continue.”

“Right,” I say, realizing that a scientifically verifiable explanation might exist for what I tried to leave behind. For what I couldn’t see.

“You never told anyone about all of this? No friends? No one to talk to?”

I shake my head.

“You must’ve felt very alone.”

I try not to look her in the eyes, stare out the window instead. Soon the naked branches will breed cherry blossoms again, petals unfurling like an unclenching fist. Fragile fingers spilling open, unveiled pistils inviting the world back in.

• • •

WHEN SPRING ARRIVES, I feel like I’ve hit a wall; sure, I’m slowly learning to value my flesh more than my mirrors, and I’ve been gaining a pound each

month, but after eight months of therapy I'm still preoccupied with how much I consume and the ascending number on the scale, now measured three times a week at the gym instead of home.

I voluntarily stop recording my food intake, though I can't stop tallying daily totals in my head. I sleep more. Plan more meals with friends. Eat half a pint of Ben and Jerry's Half-Baked with my roommates. Though I chide myself less, I still examine my profile and press my hand against my stomach.

I try to redirect my thoughts away from my lower belly. I force my eyes to linger over flabby flesh protruding from women's shirts. Force myself to think, *beautiful*, as I watch people eat and laugh. *Beautiful*.

I almost believe it.

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A FEW MONTHS later, my grandmother learns she has stage-one breast cancer. She's nearly eighty-six. Needs a double mastectomy.

Sometime after the holidays, my mother finally told my grandmother I'd been losing too much weight.

"Our perfect Caitie has a problem?" Grandma said. She and I never spoke of it. No one said the words dangerous or disorder.

From Boston, I call as soon as surgery's over and my mother says Grandma's ready to talk.

"I'm just happy to be here! I wasn't sure I'd wake up!"

She laughs. I clench my fist. I wish she had admitted her fears before surgery, when she assured me she wasn't worried—*I have to do what I have to do*. I wish she had surrendered control—found safety and relief in exposing emotion, not weighing it. I wish she would've said what many women likely would've been thinking—*What kind of woman am I without breasts?*—protruding collarbones knocking around inside our heads. Yet I know how unbearable that relinquishment can seem. How precious our control. I think of phone calls with my mother, that disappearing door. When my grandmother speaks to me, does she feel that openness disappearing, too?

Maybe we fear the parts of ourselves mirrored in each other—choose not to indict for fear of being indicted, too.

“I woke up without boobs,” she says. “And I'm *happy*. I can't believe I'm saying this, but: Who needs boobs? I'm alive!”

I unclench my fist. I, too, am grateful she's alive, but I still resent our fixation. Despite her apparent disregard to the loss of her breasts, she still seems to be thinking about it more than anything. *Disregard as survival*, I think.

But condemning my family might be my own form of disregard, one that reveals a mirror I've long been looking into. Perhaps the loss of her breasts has truly persuaded my grandmother to value her beating heart more than a reflection or a man's validation. Perhaps, unlike me, she really does feel free.

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SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER my grandmother's surgery, when we celebrate my sister's birthday at her favorite restaurant, Grandma is wearing heels and telling jokes. Her schedule's so full these days we weren't sure she'd be able to join us for this dinner. I've nearly forgotten about her mastectomy.

String lights hang above our table, but it's still dark. Vines strangle the surrounding trellis. My mother and father silently study the menu. My sister and her husband investigate it aloud. My grandmother glances at the long list of carbs and quickly seals the menu shut.

The patio's noisy, but I still hear Grandma's reply when I ask, "Want to share the eggplant Parmesan?" She almost always says yes, despite the heaping plate of pasta and cheese. It's our favorite.

"I'm having a Caesar salad," she says. "I really can't eat much these days."

"Are you sure? It won't be that much if we share."

She's sure.

So we all sit there chatting and ignoring Grandma's side Caesar while scarfing down our pasta. Several more hours will pass before I chide myself for the big Italian dinner and my sister's birthday cake, but in this moment I sprinkle a spoonful of sharp Parmesan onto every bite. Salt stings my tongue. Baked brie fills the spaces between my teeth. Butterfly crackers. Focaccia. Oil seeps into the dough.

The waiter returns with dessert menus and to-go containers. I box up half of my eggplant Parmesan. So does Mom. I really am full. Grandma lingers over the homemade gelato and mentions the store-bought one I

recently convinced her to try. (Her favorite's coffee chip. Mine's double dark chocolate.) Then she resumes discussing her shrinking appetite.

"I weighed 110 a couple months ago," she says. "But I gained *five pounds*."

"Good," I shout across the table, "Good!" I do the math: *So now she's 115. And I'm 120, or 125.* I prefer the former, though I don't admit it. Especially not to myself.

"I like the way I am now," she says.

"Good!"

"If I keep eating like this I'll keep gaining."

"Good!" I shout again, realizing my voice might be a bit too loud. Maybe my sister's glaring, my mother gazing up at the strangled trellis.

"I don't want to gain more," Grandma says, her face still composed, her hands still folded in her lap. "This is fine. This is good." Another matter of fact.

But as she says it I stop myself from shouting *good!* across the table again because I've just realized: it's not Grandma I'm shouting at; it's me.

No matter how many spoonfuls of Parmesan I allowed, no matter how many months I've been in therapy (nineteen), whenever I step on the scale, I fear the number will rise. I want to silence our pasts, but now I understand the danger of denial. Instead of shouting *good!* as though our histories no longer plague me, I need to confess—*I don't want to gain either.* I need to confess how I resent my inheritance, our mirrors and scales. And I must honestly interrogate every origin—even my own ruling hand, my own re-

stricting mind, my own repressed memories.

That night, as I lie in bed and press my hand against my full belly, I indulge my bitterness once more, wondering how many millions have been made off films starring women as thin and frail as Hepburn and Barbie. How much has been made off bodies so unlike ours that to look like them, we've made ourselves ill? Off dolls sold by the billions and sent into the hands of children around the world? *You can look perfect, too*, manufacturers and filmmakers whispered, *as soon as you look nothing like you*.

What might human beings have looked like if we'd never begun to think there was something *to* look like? When we met our reflections and looked to the person beside us to compare, did our limbs begin to thin?

As I lift my palm from my stomach, I imagine a room full of mirrors, glass walls from ceiling to floor. I imagine standing beside and before our reflected bodies, taking laces in my hands, unraveling corsets, filling lungs again. Finally recalling the sounds of our voices as we gaze and gasp and reclaim our breath.

I dream of opening the wardrobe, reaching my hand through to Anatolia, to 6,000 BC. I imagine shaking the tools from their hands and warning—*There's no return!*—stirring the water and destroying the reflection, stopping Narcissus from falling. Erasing Carlos entirely.

But I cannot make yesterday disappear. And I cannot shatter the mirrors that live inside us all. Though I long for a world without reflections that affirm our worth or numbers that measure achievement, I know we might never stop measuring, mirrors and scales forever embedded in our

eyes and actions and words. What we see is what we desire and fear, a past and present we must allow for.

Perhaps, then, this very inquiry is both a resistance and a reach—a rejection of one sort of mirror, and a creation of another.