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## How Do I Look?

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I never dreamed I would be the mother of boys. It seemed physically impossible that my body could manufacture one. Having grown up in a house where everyone was female except my father, I never knew much about my peers of the opposite sex. They were as Other as you can get; I understood them only in terms of their effect on me. They frustrated me, fascinated me, bored me, eventually drove me crazy with desire. I set up paper dolls of them in my head and they ran my life.

Yet it is probably for the best that I'm raising sons. Though they're still too small to be certain, I think I can stand to let them become who they are without interfering too much. The few things I know about what makes a decent man in this world I'm not afraid to pass on. If I had a daughter, I would be terrified of stuffing her full of all the sick shit I grew up with, of poking and prying

and picking and not letting go. Yes, I've arrived at Womanhood but don't ask me for directions. The path I took was dark and circuitous and I fell down all the time and got broken. Even now I'm not sure I'm out of the woods. How could I let my little girl try to find her own way? How could I help but take her to the very same places I've been?

Sometimes I think childhood memories are fabricated like pearls around a grain of sand. You know how it works: take one old photograph and the quick current of memory it sparks; add what you heard happened, what could have happened, what probably happened; then tell the story over and over until you get the details down. It doesn't take a degree in psychology to reverse-engineer your childhood based on the adult it produced.

Even if I've made it all up, it doesn't matter. I'm stuck with the past I believe in, even if it's wrong.

It was a long time ago. I was a tiny girl, no, I was never a tiny girl, I was a blobby girl, or, as I often thought to myself, just a blob. I was not like the girls in the stories, at least not in the stories I liked. I was all wrong, I was not right, I was ashamed. Did I say a long time ago, I meant last week.

Something was wrong with me. Intellectually I was a wonder but physically I was a catastrophe. My parents

tried to help. Nothing escaped their solicitous and well-meaning attention, not my feet, my eyes, my nose, my teeth, my weight (which was every part of me, when you think of it), not even the slight lisp I had in early grade school.

A podiatrist equipped me with various orthopedic devices to correct the minor imperfections of my lower extremities. I had a belt with attached rubber hoses that went down both legs to plates on the soles of my shoes. I don't remember ever wearing it, only seeing it in the attic years later and shuddering to think. When I started school, I pitched a big enough fit to have this monstrosity exchanged for a pair of oxblood clodhoppers with white-green hard plastic inserts. I had to wear the right shoe on the left foot and the left shoe on the right foot as if I didn't know any better. This did not go unnoticed by the vicious brats on the playground.

I had a good story, though, for anyone who would listen. See, my father had taught me to stand on his hand and walk up his arm when I was not even nine months old and my baby bones were too soft and they curved from the pressure. This explanation fit in with my understanding that my mental superpowers, my precocity, were somehow tied to my physical spazziness. I was a freak of nature. The fact that I was a prodigy had warped me, misshaped me, made me ugly and uncoordinated. I had to pay.

I had a lazy eye, mysterious allergies, and crooked teeth, treated at length and in depth by appropriate

specialists. I had surgery, I had shots every week, I did eye exercises where I focused on a pen light rigged up inside a cereal box while walking the length of the living room holding a pencil in front of my nose. My mother drove me to the city every few months to what I thought was called the Ioneer Clinic and only years later realized was the Eye and Ear. Tuesday mornings I was taken out of class to visit the speech therapist's office in the basement of the school. It was a dungeonlike room with bad lighting where we played imbecile card games that involved pronouncing words with the letter S. Snake. Scissors. Sorry.

My orthodontist, a perverse torturer who never liked me and had grotesque quantities of hair poking out of his nostrils, tightened my braces every month for four years. Toward the end, our relationship was so hostile that I snarled at him from the reclining chair like the little girl in *The Exorcist*. He finally ripped the braces off my teeth and threw me out. Even the hope of soaking my parents for another thou wasn't worth the trouble.

Haircuts too had a grim aspect. My mother took Nancy and me to her salon, with its stinky solutions, blasting hairdryers, and crowds of kvetching ladies getting their nails done. The despotic queen of this palace of poufery was a coiffeuse named Brigit, who terrorized me with her flawless Aryan glamour and the steely precision with which she trimmed our too-short bangs across our foreheads and applied her curling iron to our party hairdos.

Once every few months my mother would lighten my sister's dark blond hair with Midnight Sun, but mine was hopelessly brown.

All my other shortcomings paled beside my tendency to chubbiness, my most serious and intractable flaw. It seems now as if I were born on a diet, as if I drank skim milk instead of formula, as if the first book I ever read was a calorie counter. I was brought up to think of Ring Dings and HoHos and Yodels as pleasures beyond all conception, though whenever I got my hands on sweets I would eat them so fast I could barely taste anything. My sister was skinny; she got French fries and milkshakes all the time. I finished them for her.

Would anyone like dessert? the waitress asked, and the look my mother shot me could have iced coffee.

By the time I reached preadolescence, I had embarked on an extended tour of the weight-loss regimes popular in the seventies, including Weight Watchers, Stillman, Atkins, Searsdale, later the Beverly Hills, the Nashville Rotation, finally the Doctor's Eat Anything. Certain foods veered crazily between okay and not okay, like pistachio nuts, which you could binge on or not touch at all depending on whom you followed, and grapefruits, which you either consumed before every meal or shunned as absolutely inimical. You peeled the skin off the chicken, ate the hamburger without the roll, consumed nothing you didn't first weigh, count, or mea-

sure. Eight glasses of water a day, a whole watermelon, gluey baked concoctions made from cottage cheese and egg yolks and Sweet'n Low. When cyclamates went off the market, my mother bought a carton of Sweet'n Low so gigantic that she has it still.

She took me to a diet doctor who gave me boxes full of red and yellow and blue pills, of which I was to take a dozen a day. I raced through school with a dry mouth, a pounding heart, and a personality that was hyper and brittle enough without prescription amphetamines, thank you. They didn't work for losing weight, so I tried to get boys to like me by giving them away. They didn't work for that either. The sturdy little boxes they came in, however, were good for burying dead goldfish and turtles.

A few years ago, I found a drawerful of letters my parents had written me while I was away at summer camp. I was touched by the frequency of their communication, the details of their golf games, news of my now-dead grandmother and cousins. But in every letter, every single letter, they asked if I was remembering to take my pills. Even Daddy did it, in the few that were written in his hand. As if the damn pills were vital to my continued existence. How was it that they believed that?

I saved my babysitting money to send away for the sauna pants advertised in the back of *Seventeen* magazine. They were mustard yellow knicker-length inflatable plastic horrors with a small hand pump attached. You put them on, blew them up, and did the exercises in the booklet (if you had over fifteen pounds to lose) or



just lay around and watched TV (lucky you, less than fifteen to go). The idea was that you would sweat twice as much.

When the sauna pants proved ineffective, I fantasized about an authentic miracle implement, a magic scissors that would allow me to neatly trim off unwanted flesh without no muss, no fuss, no blood. I could look at my thighs and see exactly where to cut.

I developed the sick habit of looking at other girls and evaluating whether I'd like to have certain of their body parts. I wanted this one's incredibly white eye-whites, that one's vivacious little butt. Getting changed into our horrendous blue gym suits, I'd spy around the locker room and select components of a new anatomy as if they were Colorforms. Her legs. No, maybe they're too skinny. Hers are better. Look at the ankles. No Neanderthal guy ever objectified women's bodies like this. I still do it sometimes. I can't help it.

I had read enough teen magazines and sent away for enough movie-star beauty booklets to know that I might be able to improve my desperate life overnight if I could only get the right hairdo. But the world of preteen hairstyles was a rigid one. At the time, the sole passport to popularity was parallel hair, an utter straightness achieved by setting it nightly on empty frozen-orange-juice cans. This technique was grudgingly demonstrated to me by a Girl Scout car-pool mate, a future cheer-

leader with freckles and a flip. I felt honored that she would even talk to me, let alone take me into her pink-and-white bedroom and show me her secrets. Her mother must have made her do it. Unfortunately, hair-rolling required way more small-muscle coordination than I had in my wildest dreams. And my family did not drink frozen orange juice.

In any case, I had given up on ever looking decent, much less beautiful or thin. I think it was in about fifth grade that I started purposely neglecting my appearance. Since I refused to go shopping at the store for fat people where my mother tried to take me, she had our cleaning lady, Dory, make me a blue tent dress with multicolored flower-power daisies and a floppy white collar. I wore it for days on end. My teacher came into the bathroom and tried to help me, pulling up my socks and brushing my hair and saying things would be better for me if I would change my dress. If I would just try a little. I hated her for doing this and knew that trying would get me nowhere.

Two years later, I tried to kill myself by taking a bottle of Bayer aspirin. I had gotten a C minus in English, and Michael Feinberg liked my friend, Sandye, better than me. I wrote a melodramatic poem, then lay down on my mother's bed. My mother came home just afterward and found me there. She didn't have to try too hard to get me to tell her what I had done. She snatched me up and dragged me to the car. Sixty seconds to your headache, she muttered, quoting the television com-



mercial as we sped to the hospital. My stomach was pumped in the emergency room. Afterward I was sent to a psychiatrist. I convinced the shrink to tell my parents to cut out a few of my other doctors.

For my fourteenth birthday, my parents offered me a nose job. I refused.

One day in the car my mother told me that overweight girls sometimes make the mistake of sleeping with boys too easily because they think it will make them popular. Yeah, Ma, and if that doesn't work we just give them our diet pills.

But as thoughtless as her comment was, it was not completely off base. Ever since I got Glenn Willis to French-kiss me on the golf course, I had been chalking up sexual experiences as evidence of my physical okayness. As if they would add up to pretty. Of course it didn't work, because if you do it and they don't love you and don't want you anymore, that's evidence of your awfulness for sure.

Sometimes one of them would say I had beautiful eyes or nice shoulder blades and there would be nothing in the world like that joy. Like when my father used to admire my pinkies. Isn't it funny how I still believe there's something wonderful about my pinkies. I wonder if he could have done that for the rest of me as well.

Even now, there's a certain kind of teenage girl I can hardly stand to look at. She has lots of curvy flesh and

too-tight torn-up clothes and she thinks she wants to get fucked but that is not it, that is not it at all. It is, however, just what she will get.

By the time I went to college, I was a slob and proud of it. I never wore makeup or dieted or jogged or went shopping for clothes, and I wouldn't let any of that Barbie doll brainwashing ever touch me again. I took seminars with titles like "Ten Thousand Years of Slavery: Women and Hair" and wrote papers about the semiotics of eye shadow and images of submission and violence in magazine advertising. My own hair was a messy brown thicket, which I cultivated and trimmed myself with nail scissors, varying the length of my bangs in accordance with my mood. Short was French revolutionnaire at the barricades; long was sultry enigma.

I thought I was free.

Then I started mysteriously throwing up after every meal. It was the weirdest thing. When I was a block away from the dining hall, not feeling nauseated or anything, the meal I'd just eaten would reappear in my mouth. When it first started, I wasn't even embarrassed to run to the bushes or spit it out in a handy cup. I thought I had some kind of gastrointestinal problem. I went in for tests at the student health center, and they said, No, there's nothing physical; it's all in your head. This was before anybody knew the word "bulimia."

I was shocked and furious that they would even suggest such a thing. I was over all that, I was sure.

Even after I realized they were right, I couldn't stop. I'd keep eating and eating until I felt sick, then go to the bathroom and quietly puke. I came back to the table smiling, and ate some more. I never lost a pound from doing this, I might add.

During this period, my mother was in New Jersey, embarking on a business venture. She opened a figure salon called Inches Aweigh. It featured machines that would shake the fat off you; you didn't have to do a thing. These salons were supposed to have been a big success in Florida, but they didn't catch on in New Jersey. Personally, I never set foot in the place.

It's ironic, or perhaps predictable, that I married a hairdresser. Somehow, being in love with the person who did my hair loosened my psychological and political shackles. I sat enthralled in the purple Naugahyde chair as he moved around me in a slow circle, sliding the curving clips off his watchband and into a shifting pile of hair at my crown, nimbly switching between the blue comb and the silver scissors. We had plans for my hair, my love and I.

I'd begun to come round in my attitude toward my appearance, realizing that the infernal teen magazines were actually right. Liking the way you look really is the

secret of outer beauty and inner peace. Still, I wasn't ready for the hard stuff, like diets, exercise, or shopping. Hair, it seemed, was a quicker fix, more pleasant, easier to control.

Beginning with Tony's matriculation at the Modern College of Cosmetic Science and continuing well into his salon years, I appeared with one style after another, each a little shorter than its predecessor, until finally the nape of my neck made its stunning debut on the social scene. Suddenly I was chatting knowledgeably about bobs and layers; I amazed my friends with my command of terms like "double weight line" and "forward graduation." I realized I could make my hair represent my entire fun fun fun personality, and started on colors, blond highlights, which we dyed blue, then purple. I had permanents and body waves and artificial dreadlocks.

Hanging around the salon, I finally caught on. Nobody talks about hair when they talk about hair. They don't tell the stylist, "Take an inch off the bottom" or "Layer the sides." No, the cut they have now is boring, old, bedraggled, a stupid-looking wimpy drag. What they want is something cool, carefree, modern. The stylist's back bars are littered with the pictures they bring in, the ones they've cut out and saved and carried around in their purses for weeks: movie stars, models, Demi Moore or Melanie Griffith, or that perennial Virginia Slims ad—Rapunzel in a business suit, tangled

waves wildly mussed by off-camera fans. It's not so different from my old Colorforms game.

I live in a house full of guys, and I don't hate my body so much anymore. I don't know if it's the hairdo or the hairedresser himself, the babies I made and birthed and nursed, the weight I finally lost, the long bike rides I learned to love, the cute clothes I bought at the Gap, or the week at the spa. I had the damn nose job after all—after the nose was redesigned by an encounter with a hockey puck during my brief, undistinguished career as the only woman in an otherwise all-male ice hockey league. I even have makeup now. A week before my wedding, I rushed out to a department store to buy one of each from the nice lady at the cosmetics counter. "Lavender on the lid, violet in the crease," I repeated like a mantra.

More than any of that, or behind it, is the fact that I just grew up and got used to myself.

My little boys think I am the most beautiful woman in the world. They love to touch me, to cuddle with me, to see me dress up in party clothes and lipstick. Wear the sparkly dress, Mama, you look so pretty in it. Their infatuation rubs off on me, and I think other people catch it too.

How do I look? I look fine. I know it, because I keep checking to make sure, sucking in the flesh under my

cheekbones, standing at a certain perfect angle when I face my reflection. There's still some pain in there, some desperation, I can't even touch.

You can figure out how to act, what to wear, how to fit in, how to get by, but you can't change what has hurt you most deeply, the thing you are always trying to heal. Even laughing about it doesn't make it go away. I don't know if I believe in recovery, not even the twelve-step kind. If you admit you are powerless over the thing that has hurt you, do you finally stop coming back for more?

Even if the woman I am now looks all right, the girl I was then never will. Her time is up. She is stuck in there, staring at herself in the mirror, wanting and wanting.