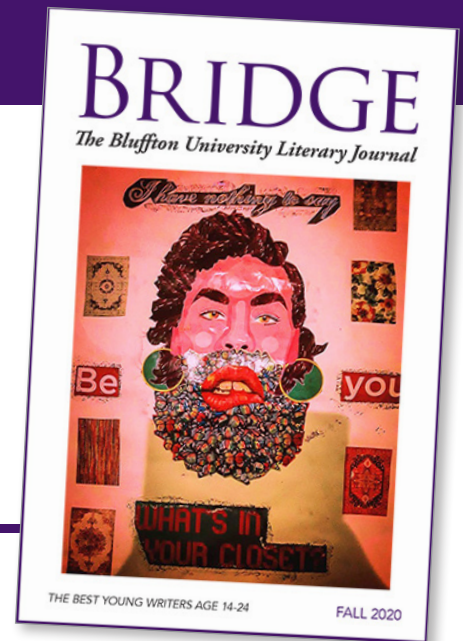


BRIDGE

The Bluffton University Literary Journal



TO REMEMBER EVEN THIS

Morgan Stevens

A statistic. That's what my mother had become. Another number.

October 20th, 2015. My senior year of high school.

One in eight women diagnosed with breast cancer.

To the doctors, she was no longer herself, but the invisible monster she held inside her chest. The one that ravaged a fifteen-year marriage, and the one they would eventually have to cut out to ensure she lived long enough for her children. She became a pile of medical bills, body as thin and frail and pale as the paper her debt came on in the mail. She became a bald and shiny head among those other mothers at my high school graduation who had cheap dyes and heads full of permed hair that looked at my mother as if she was a trapped animal in a cage. She was losing.

The doctor told her, "85% of woman who have breast cancer survive to the five-year mark. You have nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about, he told her. He never warned her about becoming less than a person, about becoming so small you are only as big as the lump in your breast that threatens to take your life.

I wanted to ask my mother what it felt like to have her body turn against

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her, what it felt like to have the one thing you were certain would always be on your side, always be an extension of yourself, betray you in your moment of need.

Even after she got better, after she finished radiation and went into remission, I wanted to ask her these questions, but the moment I tried, they'd stick to the inside of my throat, refusing to release. It wasn't until I was a sophomore in college, I had the heart to do so.

My father sat on one of the many cascading stairs of our decaying deck with a Budweiser in his hand. He pressed it to his lips and drank as if it were the only thing keeping him alive. I sat a few stairs above him, not yet in middle school, staring at his throat, wide eyed, as he swallowed. I watched his Adam's apple bob up and down with every enthusiastic gulp of what I imagined must have tasted like ambrosia with how much he seemed to love it.

He took his last large gulp, removing the can from his lips and crushing it in his bare hand before tossing it carelessly in the pile growing on the lawn. His gaze shifted towards me, head rolling on a loosened neck. "I told you my father used to drink, right kid?"

I stared at him, too young to understand that 'drink' had different implications than actually drinking. "Papa?"

My father hummed in acknowledgement, deep and low in his throat. His Adam's apple moved along with it. "Remember kid, your body is a temple. I wouldn't put anything in it, or on it, that you don't want forever," he said without explanation, without warning, and suddenly stood, not caring to hear a reply and walked towards our garage. I stood to follow.

Senior year of being in an all-girls high school. Medical Explorations. Third Period. Mrs.

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cousins.

She asked each girl in the class on the first day why they wanted to be there, what their plans for the future were, what medical profession they were thinking of. When it was my turn I stared straight at her, voice clear. “My name is Morgan. I am a senior and after undergrad I want to become an O.B.G.Y.N.” I was the only girl in the class who did.

After each girl had her turn, the one who sat next to me turned to me and tapped me roughly on the shoulder. “A vagina doctor huh? I’m not surprised,” she stated.

“They do more than that. Not surprised why?”

“Well you’re a lesbian, aren’t you? Of course, you would enjoy staring at vaginas all day,” she said, a confident smirk on her face.

“*Josie, I’m bi.* And-“

At that point Mrs. Causis had started lecturing and there was no turning back, no explaining myself to her. No use anyway.

If it is possible to be intellectually turned on by a profession, then the prospect of becoming entrenched in gynecology and practicing it was exactly what the premise of being an OBGYN did for me. It was a *tool*, a method of understanding, a way to get to the answers of questions I held so near and dear to myself. It allowed one, with only occasional scorn and laughter, the ability to understand the part of sex that had become the most taboo: the female body.

What fascinated me was the idea of skin on skin, how sex is the only way a human being can take the time to be inside of one another no matter one’s sexuality. What fascinated me was the way men were allowed to be out in the open. Where their genitals had been become a rite of passage, while women’s on the other hand, aren’t allowed to exist freely. Women have stereotypically become a place for men to reside inside, rather than whole beings themselves.

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I wanted to figure out why all these things held true, while at the same time, not desiring to turn away from the very flesh that we are given.

How could Josie in my Medical Explorations class ever come to understand such a thing?

In our living room hallway hung a picture of my mother at eighteen, her blue eyes sparkling with all the expansive opportunities she would have looked forward to. Her ears adorned small pearl earrings and a ring pokes out from her hands folded as if in prayer. As far back as I can remember, my mother never wore jewelry. She never did her hair or makeup. Instead dirt lived under her fingernails from gardening and after her golden wedding band bent, she never wore any more rings. The most feminine thing about her was her constant need to purchase Vera Bradley bags from thrift stores.

Once as a child, I poked my tiny fingers through her earlobe, stretched from age and the weight of heavy earrings. Understandably, my mother freaked, swatting my hand away.

“Why don’t you wear earrings like Nana?” I asked, talking about my Dad’s mom.

“I used to.”

This answer spurred curiosity in my seven-year-old brain. “Are they cars? Or buttons? Or the leafy things-“

“No kiddo.” She pulled me closer to her on the couch as we cuddled and watched sweaty men throw each other around a wrestling ring. “Boring ones. Now shh, Smackdown is almost on.”

In an interesting twist of fate, my father’s mother taught me how to be a woman. Everything from periods to shaving and makeup to jewelry, she was the grandmother with beehive hair you weren’t surprised knew all of these trends. It’s not that I didn’t ask my

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mother if she could teach me. But every time I mentioned shaving or makeup, she'd shrug it off, not thinking it was something I needed for a rite of passage.

As a teen, the only glimpses of stereotypical femininity I upheld was a massive assortment of jewelry on my body. Around this time, I was nosey and began digging through old family boxes in the basement. Lo and behold, I found my mother's jewelry box. It was small, wooden, and covered in dust with everything thrown around inside. Necklaces tangled with who knew what else, buried and forgotten.

I wonder if my mother felt she could no longer be feminine with a brutish husband, one child, and another on the way. Rings and bracelets serve no purpose when washing dishes or fixing cars. To a lesser extent, I wondered if she simply *forgot*. T-shirts were the clothing of choice for the whole family, so she never accented any of her natural curves. She never curled her hair, preferring to put the greying locks in a bun at the base of her skull, and she never painted her nails because she hated how 'heavy' they made her fingers feel.

When she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2015, I was appalled. Not because she had cancer, but because it was in her *breasts*, usually a feminine cancer. My mother wasn't woman enough to me, or at least, I didn't associate her with the mothers of the private Catholic schoolgirls I had come to know over the last four years. No wine weekends or girls' nights, but instead Godzilla marathons and dirt flecked cheeks were what my mother preferred. If she, who was a forgettable woman could get this scary female disease, then I could too. Nothing is more terrifying than the realization at eighteen that my body was a ticking time bomb just like hers, and the less I thought about it, the better.

My father's hands gripped the steering wheel in the casual way it always did, left hand resting on the top of the arc, right hand constantly fiddling with his phone or his pants or

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the pennies in the change cup, never actually where it should be. I stared blankly out the window in the front seat of our van, watching as the beautifully blue Rocky Mountains seemed to run with us as we drove down the highway back to campus. Fall break was shorter than it should have been, and I wasn't ready to go back to school and deal with the girl I had left behind. I loved her and she had loved me back. But only when it was convenient for her to do so.

“Dad?”

He hummed, turning down the metal song blasting on the radio, Guns N' Roses' *Sweet Child O' Mine*. “Yeah?”

“Can I talk to you about something that's been bothering me? I need advice. Makes me nervous to ask you about it.”

His gaze shifted from the road to me for a split second and back. He ran a hand roughly through his chestnut hair that he complained was too long, but I thought looked perfectly fine. “You're my buddy. You can tell me anything, kid.”

I swallowed roughly, staring at the expanse of my thighs and refusing to look up any longer. “You know... I'm not straight right?”

My father chuckled. “I've known since you were seventeen. I was wondering when you were going to tell me.”

I'm sure I gaped at him awkwardly for a few moments. Was it that obvious? I thought I was a grade A actor in pretending to be straight. Didn't I only ever talk to him about dudes I thought were hot? I opened my mouth to begin to say something, but he interrupted me.

“Morgan, I don't care what you like, who you like. As long as you like a person for being a person and not their body, I have no complaints.”

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I didn't really give my parents any warning before I got tattoos the summer between my freshman and sophomore year in college. I was living with my aunt and uncle that summer to escape my parent's overbearingness, and in order to rebel, I decided to get my first one. Written in elegant Latin script in the center of a triangle made of flowers and sticks read, *Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit*. It meant, *A joy it will be one day, perhaps*, to remember even this. In the wake of an upcoming divorce, the diaspora of all my high school friends, the lingering stress of college life, a tattoo was the only way I had to remind myself that one day all of this loneliness, exhaustion, and hurt would all be worth it. It had to be.

The first thing people asked me was if it hurt. It did, but not in the way one imagined it would. Tattoos, for me anyway, weren't as much of a physical pain as a mental one. *Your upper arm will never be bare again; neither will your upper thigh*, I thought after my second tattoo. The loss of impermanence for permanence on my own body. Something that lasts forever, and the sacrifice that comes with that realization.

My father, when he finally saw the first tattoo nearly two months healed, glared at me, eyes small, seated slits in his face. Before he could open his mouth to say anything, I stopped him.

"I know, I know. My body is a temple, but I am the god it was built for Dad."

"As long as you don't mind the fact that in twenty years it'll begin to wrinkle and look terrible, I don't care. Not my body."

When I was little, probably the ripe age of five or so, I refused to wear a shirt during summertime. I had wanted to feel the warmth of the sun on my bare skin, feel the wind tickle my tiny body hairs, be able to be free of the restrictive clothing my mother had always put me in.

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Other children in my neighborhood never wore shirts. The little boys, whose chests looked no different than mine, were never forced to wear anything, and when my mother grabbed me and attempted to shove my head through a shirt one mid-summer's day, I had told her so.

She tried to hold me still, replying through gritted teeth as I struggled like a slippery eel against her. "It's because you're a girl honey. Little girls wear shirts."

I continued to fight her for some time until my father came out of the backdoor, hat on his head and gloves on his hands, ready to cut down some of the dead branches from our oak tree. He looked at my mother and I struggling on the lawn and let out a chuckle. "What's going on?"

"Morgan refuses to wear a shirt," my mother had told him.

He eyed us for a moment, my mother and I waiting to hear his reply. He smiled. "As long as she's in the backyard, I don't think it matters." He stepped down the cascade of deck stairs and kneeled on the ground in front of me, my mother stepping back and crossing her arms in disagreement, but not saying anything. "As long as you promise me to wear a shirt when you're out front, you don't have to wear one when you're out back, okay?"

I nodded and promised him I would. Turning to take one quick look at my mother, I paused to meet her eyes and then ran off to play with my dog, Scooby.

I heard my mother's protests, but they were short lived against my father's logic. "Brian... what about the neighbors? I don't like the way they stare at her."

My father laid one hand gripping my mother's shoulder tightly. "Let her be a kid for a while longer, Amy. Soon she won't be able to ever do this again."

I think back on this now and chuckle to myself. I've never really thought of my body as being 'female,' it's just an entity that is, ever since I was a child. I wanted to be 'one of the boys,' and to be able to display my skin, spit on the sidewalks, climb trees, and show

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off the scars on my knees like the other boys did.

Part of me wonders if this mentality my parents had and my teachers in middle school had when they told me to not sit with my legs open because it was ‘unlady like,’ was the same mentality that forced woman to become ashamed of their bodies. When I hit puberty, I was never allowed to leave the house without a bra, and as a senior in high school, when I wore a shirt a little too low cut on the sides that showed my bra, my mother forced me to change, stating people were going to get the wrong ideas or think I was, as she called them, ‘a lady of the night.’

Was it for these reasons I stopped identifying with my body, that it just became a thing in the background I kept with me but never really took the time to think about? Were these the reasons that when I hit high school and college, I was terrified to let others see me change, see me exposed without a shirt at retreats and sleepovers and even in my own dorm room? At what point, had being a girl meant I had to cover myself up to the world, and never let them see what was underneath like some large secret?

“Go change. You can’t wear that.” My mother stood in the bathroom, grooming her face for my high school baccalaureate dinner. For a second I stood in shock, not because she’d commented on my dress, but for the fact that she was lathering her face with makeup. Pale lips became bright pink and the stubs of her eyelashes had grown long where they now dusted the inside of her glasses’ frame. Her bald head reflected the only lightbulb not dead in the fixture until she put her little knit cap on.

For the first times in months since she started chemo, she looked rather normal, beautiful almost, and my heart ached. I didn’t realize I’d lost so much of her until the ghost of who she used to be peered through her makeup.

“Did you hear me?”

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But at least her cancer had not taken away the fight in her voice. And with the sound of it, I snapped out of my trance. “Mom, I like this dress.”

“I know. But you look like a lady of the night.”

Let it be known, the same way I hated wearing shirts as a small child, I hated wearing dresses. I felt like a box, lacking the subtle curves the other girls my age had. I knew I’d only be walking on the stage once or twice to receive an award. I just wanted to feel as pretty and special as everyone else did all clothed in expensive dresses their parents bought for them.

I bought my dress from a thrift store and altered it, trimming the length so I wouldn’t trip over it walking on stage. It was a rather plain and simple red cocktail dress. Think of one a Bond girl would wear and that’s close enough. I adorned red lipstick to match.

“I do not look like a prostitute.”

She turned and glared at me before brushing past on her way out of the bathroom. “That isn’t what I said. Where the hell are my shoes? Brian, hurry up!” she yelled down the stairs at my father.

“I’m not changing. This is what I want to wear since you wouldn’t let me wear my vest.” I plopped down on the couch, having been ready for the better part of fifteen minutes while my parents scrambled around looking for what they needed.

“Aha!” She’d found her ballet slippers under the pile of discarded dog leashes and began smacking them together to get the dirt out. “Because all the other girls will be wearing-“

“I don’t care about that. I don’t care that it’s a Catholic school.”

She stopped smacking her shoes together and looked at me. We held tense eye contact for a moment until my father began climbing the stairs, boots thudding as he did so.

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My mother opened her mouth to speak, but I interrupted her. “I’ll be in the car if you need me.”

I remember the sound of the van door slamming shut and the pinch of the heels I wore on my toes. I remember the anger. Death was still present in our home. Everyone was still worried about her health, and yet I still rose to each occasion to argue with her. I wanted to feel bad for her, to take care of her, to love her like a good oldest child should, and yet she always managed to make me feel like the odd family member out. I ached desperately for us to be close like we were in the days of watching WWE, and yet every time I wanted to close the gap between us, arguments like this would happen. My longing went back into a box and I kept hoping that one day, the chemo would help return my mother from wherever she’d gone to.

My father didn’t hide his desire for a son back in the house when I was still an only child. There are eight years between my brother and I. Eight whole years of desperately wanting a little gremlin to watch football or play baseball with you, except much to his dismay, I hated sports. Whenever the little league sports magazines would show up in our mailbox, he’d wave it wildly in front of me as I pouted in the lawn, cross-legged.

He tried every summer up until the one my brother was born to get me to do some kind of sport. He wanted me to run outside. He wanted little eight-year-old me to stop nibbling on cookies and loose the baby weight that clung around my hips. If I wore a shirt that was a little too tight and skin peaked out, he’d grab the excess skin on my sides and pinch it attempting to be playful. It was my cheese belly.

Most women experience their loathing of their body through their mother nagging on them for their acne or weight. Mine came from my father.

As I grew older and my sister also came into the world, my father continued to

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joke that I was his favorite son and I loved it. I wanted to be a boy, or at least act like one since I was small, and he encouraged me, albeit forced sometimes. It was a running gag he and I both still honor. But the issues came when my father finally realized his favorite son was actually a girl.

When I drew nearer to puberty and my mother mandated that I wear a bra, my father treated me differently. We stopped horsing around like we used to and suddenly the way I looked mattered more to him. My weight was a joke he could toss in from time to time and it was a side of my father I wasn't used to. It was then I noticed he picked on my mother in the same manner, poking her soft belly after childbirth. It was the first time I took note of it.

My mother, not caring what society or my father thought of her, brushed him off. Yet his comments became the obnoxious elevator music of my mind and I didn't know how to make it stop. I wanted other people's voices to fill that space, lovers to tell me how much they adored my body when I didn't. And when I had no one, I pushed the thought of my physical body as far away as possible.

I simply forgot that my body existed.

"Just because I was the first one to appreciate your body, doesn't mean I'll be the only one," Jake told me, eyes clouded with the shots of vodka he decided to take. He stared at the ground as if it had the answers to my questions.

We never dated. Never even fell in love, but I am sure I loved him more than I should have. And I wished most of all, that college sophomore me knew better than college freshman me to not fall in love with people who will only use you.

But she didn't.

I told him that his eyes fascinated me, an intermixing of rainwater and cultivated

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Earth in his irises. I told him I loved the way his shoulders rose to meet his neck, how they seem to carry a burden he wouldn't let me touch, but grew stronger nonetheless. I told him how the mix of musky cologne and the aged leather of his jacket, created a scent that relaxed my body whenever he was near.

I told him that he was the first person to treat my body as a work of art. To take the time to acknowledge the way it curves in directions I wish it didn't, and call them beautiful. To ask me why I dye my hair as if I was running away from something. To look at every inch of bare skin and believe that I would look beautiful no matter what I wore.

He didn't love me, mind you, simply said these things as a repayment for making him feel better about himself. I'd given him everything I had, answered every time he called, edited his college essays, gave him advice on how to leave his ex-girlfriend. Maybe he only complimented me because he felt like he owed me something.

What I never did tell him though, was the way he made my body come alive. Made time start where it had been stopped. Suddenly, because of him, I was aware of every tendon, every muscle and hair and tooth and smile I offered myself in the mirror. For the first time since my body began to change, I didn't hate it. I didn't mind that I wasn't as thin as I wanted to be. Didn't mind that I was just another average brown haired, brown eyed girl because *Jake* liked me.

If my body was the temple that houses me, if I am the god it was built for, than I wanted him to be its only worshiper. I wanted to let him in. No matter how many times I extended out a hand, Jake never entered.

Two days after he cut off our pseudo relationship with me, he told me he started seeing another girl at his university. The first time I saw him in three months, his neck was covered in hickeys. "Didn't think to cover it up," was the only excuse he could muster.

"...doesn't mean I'll be the only one," he said. But he was the first one to do so,

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the first one to force me to come out of my own mind and notice my body for what it really is. He'll never acknowledge that, before him, I had nearly forgotten my body existed. I became the Zen master of physical agony, able to convince my mind that when I cut off the top of my finger with a pair of craft scissors, it didn't *really* hurt. Able to convince body that the pain of a tattoo was no more intense than nicking myself when I climbed trees as a child.

I pushed the thought of my body – the one that ached from pain, the one with breasts, the one my father criticized – further and further away until I believed I could exist outside of it. All that really mattered was my mind anyway right? Wasn't that the thing people were supposed to find the most attractive? If I could strengthen my mind with literature and philosophy, learn how to create connection through empathy and compassion, what use did my body have for me besides the thing that is forced to house my consciousness? There was this deep part of me that never wanted much of a body in the first place, or at least, I didn't want to live in my own skin, especially after I realized my mother's body wasn't so different from my own.

Even after he quit calling, I could not separate the connection I had remade with my body. I became aware how my body would sometimes quiver when I can't control my emotions. How bad it actually *hurt* to cry. How at times, it feels like I swallowed a stone years ago and, through talking to him, have just come to notice its existence.

I'm not hurt that he was the first, but more afraid that he'll be the last. More importantly, I was terrified I could no longer be free from the confines of my body, that Jake reconnected two halves I can no longer separate.

My college biology professor, Dr. Ghedotti, stood at the bottom of the mighty amphitheatric classroom, gesturing widely at the PowerPoint to his left. "Cancer," he began,

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“I’m sure has been covered in your biology classes before. But we are going into details that you probably never have before today.”

Ghedotti talked for fifty minutes about the logistics of cancer and its research.

The most common form of cancer? Lung. And second? Breast.

He dove into details about the human genome and how over time, every time your cells copy DNA, then split from its sister, moving to where it is needed, the more likely it is for that cell to become cancerous. There are times when our body forgets to eliminate cells that have grown too old to function, that have replicated to its max number, and those are the cells that eventually crowd around each other like family at a gathering.

I stared intensely at the diagrams and charts the entire class period, forgetting to take notes for the majority of the time. Could that lump of cell, packed so tightly together it looked like a smooth white pebble, no larger than a pea, be the very thing that threatened to kill my mother nearly a year ago?

Oddly enough, in that biology classroom, everything grew to make sense. Cancer happens for x, y and z reasons. It can be treated this way over this period of time. It was simply a cluster of rogue cells, unaware that the consequences of its existence was negative. It was a simple explanation for the thing that hovered over my family as its own personal ghost, threatening our very foundation.

The body became a well-oiled machine with a few glitches here and there that seemed so easy to fix, so easy to replace the parts of us that no longer worked according to biology. Is this how the doctors saw my mother? A being with a part that just needed to be removed? Was this understanding of her illness that easy for them?

If the body is as much of a well-oiled machine as biologists and doctors promised me it was, then why do I still shiver at the word cancer and the very thought of the hickey on Jake’s neck?

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Though with that thought, came my father's voice from a memory I had nearly forgotten.

"Remember kid, your body is a temple. I wouldn't put anything in it, or on it, that you don't want forever."

Temple, huh? Was my mother's weak and helpless form still a temple for her soul to reside? Was there really a god living there anymore, or had it left her the moment her walls began to crumble on her?

During my junior year of high school, I took a field trip with my A.P. Biology class to a cadaver lab at the local community college. The woman leading the lab was a professor who seemed more excited to be there than most of the other girls in my group. After removing the organs of a sixty-year-old woman and a seventy-two-year old man and passing them around, the professor pulled out a bucket from under the metal table and popped open the lid. If the smell of formaldehyde had not been strong before, it sure was now, and I took notice to the way it burned my nasal hairs. The professor plunged her gloved hands into the bucket and pulled out a full human brain. Smiling, she told us that it was from the male cadaver and how they believe he died from an aneurism. She jutted the brain out in front of her and asked who wanted to hold it.

After a few seconds of painful silence and even more painful stares, I stepped forward and held my palms open. The brain was heavier than I thought it'd be, less like Jell-O and more like a brick of ridged and drying clay. I stared intently at the place where she had told us was the aneurism that killed him.

Another girl in my class took a few steps forward and eyed the organ in my hands suspiciously. "You're holding his whole life in your hands. Everything he remembers is in there somewhere. His name. Who he was... Doesn't that bother you?"

"I'm honored."

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Sof, my college suitemate, stood in our bathroom doorway, her ginger hair catching the overhead sink light rays as if it were the setting sun, one hand on her hip and the other attempting to smooth down the “whispies” of her hair as she called them. “Hey Morgan,” she began. “What do you think about painting with me?”

I sat at my desk, rapidly typing an essay for some class. “I don’t have any canvases, let alone paint to make anything with.”

Sof smiled, moving towards me to sit on my roommate’s desk who wasn’t home. “Don’t worry. We can share and then if you like, you can buy your own paint. I honestly don’t mind.”

It was then I gave in, joined her in her new sudden hobby. After a few awkward paintings, (one of a woman standing in what looks like post-apocalyptic rain, and another of some weird Georgia O’Keeffe-like abstract vagina,) I settled on drawing and paintings nudes of women. I painted as many as I had paint and canvas for, hanging them on my walls and admiring them from my bed. Why I painted only women, I’m not truly sure. Maybe it was because the curves of her hips called to me in the painting I copied from online. Maybe it was the way her shoulders hung, tight and strong, but never unwelcoming. Maybe it’s because the paintings reminded me of me, or at least, the me that I wanted to believe my body looked like.

After the paintings, after Jake came and went from my life, and because of that combination, I found myself staring at people, noting the way they moved, the way they interacted with the world in painstaking detail, utterly fascinated with the concept of muscles moving under skin. People became the inspiration for my art pieces, me suddenly desperate to capture the subtlest of human movement, the slightest twist of human expression. I watched students walk around my university quad, noting the way they laughed with each other in the April sun, or how all of the freshman appear to school

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together like little awkward fish. Things I never really took the time to notice before.

Out of all the people I stared at, I wanted to paint women the most because of how their bodies were underappreciated as an independent subject. The more I painted them, the curves of their hips and the waves of flowing hair, made me appreciate exactly what I was doing. I felt no need to create perfect lines. I was free to use any color on the spectrum. Life was messy, like my paintings, like all the people I'd watch walk to and from class, but messy had its own right to belong somewhere.

The first woman I painted was from behind, body swirled in vague abstraction, her shape unapologetically curvy and natural. Sof cocked her said to the side when I was finished, staring at it intently for a few seconds before her face lit up. "Hey! She looks like you!"

No matter how many women I painted after that, the first is still my favorite, and after I painted it, I hung it up where I could see it from my dorm bed. Why had this painting ended up so much like me? Maybe I was compensating for something I didn't have. Maybe I wanted to let the past me come out from her clothes, come out from her anxieties and self-hatred to hang beautifully on a wall. I wanted to show my mother, my father, and all of those stupid teachers and awful peers that lady-like didn't have to mean quiet or covered.

It was only then I learned to appreciate the human body, the *female* body, for what it really was. Something *mine*, something *beautiful*.

My mother and I sat across a restaurant table from each other, my hands clinging to her thinning and wrinkling ones, noting the way her hair was now long enough to brush her shoulders after being in remission for two years, each lock turning greyer and greyer every passing moment. She was exhausted, the upcoming divorce slowly eating at her strength,

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but she smiled at me nonetheless when I told her my anxiety about sophomore year. I told her about my paintings, what Jake and I had planned to do together, and how all those years ago I should have appreciated her more when she had cancer. “I should have told you I loved you more, Mom. You could have *died*.”

“I know Morgan, but I had you and your siblings to take care of. I couldn’t live what could have been the end of my life upset that I might die. You were there in every moment I needed you to be.”

The waitress placed our meals down and my mother’s hands retreated from mine, digging into her chicken fried steak with a fork. I was suddenly sick, watching her devour her food. The cadavers came back to my mind, how nobody would touch them my junior year but me. I thought of her body, laying there cold on the table, her organs being emptied of her last meal, her favorite chicken fried steak. The fear of my mother becoming the cadaver no one loved again was irrational and I knew that. She wanted to be buried in the cemetery of her childhood town when she died, she had told me when I became the arbiter of her will. But the image still stuck with me, made my body ache with muscle memory.

“You’re not afraid the cancer will come back?” I asked. “You still have both breasts. It’s possible.”

My mother shrugged, sticking a piece of chicken in her mouth and washing it down with iced tea. She licked her lips as if this was the best meal she’d ever eaten. “You can’t live your entire life in fear that some disease is going to kill you. You can’t worry that you’re going to have cancer because I did.”

“That’s not what I-“

“Morgan, I’m your mom. I *know* you’re worried about it. And I just want to tell you that there is so much more in your life to worry about than cancer. People act like

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it's the end of the world, but it isn't. The end of the world is hating your body and never actually living your life because you're afraid."

I broke out into a grin, my eyes pricking with tears as I reached out a hand towards her. She wiped hers hastily on a napkin and placed it gently in mine. "Thanks Ma, I really needed to hear that."

"I know."