We Are Fragments: A Memoir of Reconciliation with Self and World

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Dr. Corey

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Introduction

I think that some part of me is broken. While others search for the light, I find truth wrapped up in layers of darkness, warm like a mother’s womb or the crook of a father’s arms into which I run. Some would say beauty emerges from the symmetrical union of two halves, but I find it in the splintered cacophony of difference that doesn’t seem to fit together. And I think that my desire to find beauty in the broken belies my need to find it within myself, for I am a piece of art rendered in pieces. With my right eye larger than my left, and the same for my feet, I am quite literally from top to bottom a broken mess. Yet I find truth in that, and therefore beauty too.

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The devil tried to kill me once when I was three, again when I was five, and has been trying to kill me ever since. The first time, it was just a slight trip, a brief tumble from Dad’s arms. He’d been holding me while walking along a sidewalk when he stumbled. As he went down, my head hit the pavement with a thud, and the next stop was the hospital. Mom was already there. She’d been checked after she’d cracked her ribs from a bout of pneumonia, and they had to wheel her in to see me. I remember entering the tunnel machine to get an MRI. It arched over my head and all around me, like I was sliding into a toaster oven. I don’t recall any pain, only the teddy bear that awaited me when I reemerged. It was chubby, and brown, and had a bright red State Farm shirt on it.

When I was five, I simply wandered too close to the edge of a street while riding a bike with no breaks. The wheels on the bike went round and round, all the way to the bottom of the hill where oncoming traffic awaited. It was my dad who charged after me, shoving me and my bike off the road and onto the grass while he collided with the gravel. I cried as we made it back
up the hill, though I had escaped unharmed. My tears were for my dad, whose palms had turned red and sticky with blood.

I left the near-death experiences behind as I grew older, but it’s not always a physical death the devil’s after. Sometimes, it’s the slow pull that best manages to unravel a life, the persistent tap that can break a family into fragments.

A Man of Faith and Flaws

“Columbus is my Nineveh,” Dad’s told me before. He alludes, of course, to the Biblical town of the Old Testament, where people’s actions grew so deplorable they drew God’s wrath. If Columbus, Georgia is Nineveh, that makes my dad Jonah, the stubborn, somewhat foolish (for thinking he could ever run from God) prophet sent to warn the people to repent. The story holds a place in Biblical mythology so popular even people who have never stepped foot in a church tend to know the reference. The guy who got swallowed by a whale is hard to forget. It’s unclear why Dad refers to his home with such condemnation. A devout man of God, he clearly has opinions about the city’s moral state of being, yet Dad perhaps also has his personal reasons.

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Dad is the second to last child in a series of five children born in as many years. Of the five, only the two youngest permanently moved outside of the city’s limits, and even then, Aunt Audrey settled down in Atlanta, a mere two-hour drive away. Dad was the one who hopped from state to state, getting farther and farther away until our family ended up on the opposite side of the country.

As the established businessman, Dad took on the role of patriarch in his family after his father died. But that wasn’t his experience growing up. Rather than take charge, Dad had been held back. When Grandmommy gave birth to Dad, he came out with legs that didn’t fully
As a kid, any time Dad asked to do something, he already knew the answer. When he wanted to play sports like his older brother, Thomas, Grandmommy said no. Such activity wasn’t good for him, she said. When he walked, his feet shuffled along, and his knees tired easily. And he couldn’t expect help from the older brother who didn’t have any interest in toting along a younger sibling. Eventually, Dad stopped asking altogether. If he wanted to keep occupied, he’d do it on his own, finding his way to the backyard to shoot hoops by himself. He realized that this way, on his own, he could set his own limits, and when he got older, he extended the limits and moved away.

But he never severed ties. Every birthday, every holiday, he’d sit next to me and my sisters as we dialed the number.

“Say Merry Christmas,” he’d coach. “Tell Grandmommy thank you for the card and money.”

As my sisters and I got older, we couldn’t resist rolling our eyes at the lines he fed us. Both of our parents made sure we knew the etiquette of thank-you cards and calls. Though we saw our relatives a handful of times in our youth, we got to know them well through this gifting ritual. Aunt Juanita and Uncle Dex always sent a check with their card. Aunt Valencia included a gift card to the Macy’s where she worked for as long as I can remember. And Nanaw’s cards sang out a music with flashing lights. We learned to unfold cards carefully, lest the money tumble out onto the floor, and as we got older, we learned to guard our expressions of disappointment when we’d pry the card open and saw only loving words but no money inside.

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As a parent, Dad always seemed to be the first to lose his temper, but we didn’t give him credit for his secret reserves of patience. Lexi and I had a recurring game. We’d tell Dad we had a secret for him and urge him to come over and bend down, to put his ear up to our mouths. When he was close enough, we unloaded our secret in the form of incoherent whispers, giggles, and spit. Over and over he’d “fall” for it, claiming to be surprised when he ended up with another earful of saliva.

Other times, he’d erupt, and his anger spilled out through his words. It was always verbal, though one time, he acted on his frustration. In her teenage years, Cassie had bought a new purse, as she frequently did, and the sales clerk neglected to remove the security tag. That new white leather bag set off alarms every time we stepped into a store, until finally, Dad declared he would remove it.

He strode towards the bag nestled in my sister’s grasp, determined to wrench the plastic button from its surface. Cassie backed away, not in fear but still wary of his less-than-delicate hands and how they might ruin the leather. And she had good reason considering her earliest memory was of Dad breaking one of her dolls. She refused to let him touch the bag. When he insisted, she said no. Anger flared; he advanced on her while she backed away until they were running through the house, dodging furniture along the way. Eventually, Cassie escaped to the garage, putting the mass of an entire vehicle between them. Lexi, Mom, and I spilled out behind them, and Mom put an end to it all. She usually stepped in to redirect my dad’s anger to herself until the two escalated into screaming matches that had Cassie herding me and Lexi into her room for safe-keeping.

Sometimes, though, Dad’s anger was justified. I have a vague memory of gathering around the living room with my two older sisters as Lexi told us about what her youth leader said
that made Dad angry. She leaned down from her perch on the recliner as though telling a ghost story around a campfire. Apparently, the youth leader called my sister a negro, and that’s the first time I remember learning that “negro” could be used as a bad word. But this wasn’t the first time this youth leader made comments about my sister’s skin. He had a habit of making light about slavery, and Mom would hush him, warning him not to talk that way within my dad’s hearing. That an adult white male had used that word on my sister, an adolescent biracial girl, had seemed more like an anecdote for Lexi to share with us than an insult or degradation. It was just some light church racism, after all, and not the only of its kind. I wasn’t old enough to be in the high school youth group, yet I knew about people’s habit of teasing one of the high school boys by calling him a farmer because he was Mexican. I suppose they thought it was just some harmless fun.

At that church, Dad was one of only two black members, so they obviously stuck out in the congregation. The other black member was a woman with a white husband and two interracial kids. Brita was my age. Boisterous and loud, she didn’t mesh well with my quiet self, so though we should’ve had a connection, I never got to know her. Besides, her and her family sat on the other side of the sanctuary. I could see them, but I didn’t interact with them. In Boise, Idaho of the early 2000’s, I didn’t have much to go on for how black people acted, but I noticed a pattern in the way my dad behaved whenever we went out in public.

One of my favorite stories that my mom tells is the difference between her as a Northerner and my dad as a Southerner. During a trip to New York City, she sternly warned us not to talk to strangers. In the North, she explained, people stared straight ahead and carried on with their business, so we were to do the same and follow her in an orderly fashion. Not long after she began leading us through the crowd, she heard a commotion behind her. Some outsider
who clearly didn’t understand the rules of the city was calling out “hello” to the people passing by. It was my dad, breaking the sacred rule and acknowledging the presence of other human beings. He does that. When Dad sees a black man on the street, they greet each other like brothers, though they move on to never speak again. It’s like a secret brotherhood that they access by tipping their heads before they carry on their way, and I wonder if they realize what connects them, something that goes beyond the need to know the other’s name but is an unspoken acknowledgement of shared history that fuses them together.

**Passport to Purity**

*I once attended a presentation where the speaker read out a children’s book about a fish. This fish swam its whole life in oblivion until one day, it had the chance to see that there was a place where water didn’t exist. But the idea was unfathomable because the fish didn’t even know what water was. Though it swam in water for all of its life, it couldn’t identify the substance around it. The speaker used that story as a metaphor for culture. Sometimes, people don’t understand the culture in which they exist.*

Our parents decided to homeschool me and my sisters. When it came down to it, they decided the lifestyle because they felt called to it, but behind the prayer, Mom had additional reasons, supporting evidence, shall we say. She wanted to direct the focus of our education, allow us to learn at our own pace, and protect us from the bullying she was sure we’d endure as the offspring of an interracial couple.

Aside from the *racial* dilemma, the concerns aligned with those of many homeschooling parents who feared the brainwashing they believed came along with a public education. When I finally took a class outside of homeschooling circles, I squirmed in my seat at the casual mention
of evolution. I’d been warned about this scheme, and I stopped just short of plugging my ears as
the professor carried on with his lecture.

Homeschooling allowed parents to actively engage with the formation of their children’s
minds and worldviews. For Christian parents, it gave them the chance to infuse faith into the
lives of their kids. In the early years, our mornings began at 7 a.m. sharp, before Dad left for
work. We’d gather in the living room where we’d sing hymns and pledge allegiance to the
American flag, Christian flag, and the Bible. Among our extracurricular subjects was a focus on
purity.

Dating was never an option for the Ivey household. Courtship took its place as a deeply-
 ingrained concept long before any of us reached an acceptable dating age, which, turned out to
be never. Before I even developed a crush on any boy, I learned to accept the idea of Mom and
Dad accompanying me on dates. Any fantasies of romantic dinners had better include two extra
spots.

Both of my parents held this opinion, but Mom would deliver the rules. For as long as we
could, we should guard our hearts from romantic urges, she said, and I’m sure I feigned
understanding. But just like the time she tried to explain taxes to me, I didn’t really know what
she meant. The word “sexy” was just another way to say something was cool, and I didn’t learn
until my teenage years that the clothes came off before sex happened. Before that, I thought just
spooning with someone could produce a baby. So, when she talked of romantic urges, I just
nodded and went along with my life.

All I wanted of romance was what I read in the books. I wanted a boyfriend like Ned
Nickerson from the world of Nancy Drew. I devoured those books during elementary school, and
in addition to the deep desire to solve mysteries, I wanted someone as devoted to me as Ned was
to Nancy. Unfortunately, my sheltered, suburban life yielded neither mystery nor man, and my sister snitched on me when I confided in her about my wishes. After my sister told on me, Mom called me into her room for a talk. Again, she explained that she didn’t want me to awaken desires, but this time, she added that I wasn’t allowed to read romance like Nancy Drew anymore. While I still didn’t grasp what she meant, I took the mandate too far. After our talk, I’d pause every time I came to a questionable passage in my reading and trod over to find Mom.

“The characters are holding hands,” I’d say, waiting for her permission. “Is it okay to keep reading?”

Back and forth I’d travel, investigating every detail. Eventually, I bothered my mom to the point of exasperation, which would have been a brilliant tactic, if it had any intention behind it. In reality, I dared not do what felt like a sin, so I checked and double-checked my boundaries in order to give disobedience a wide berth.

The night I began reading *Twilight*, I encountered the same dilemma, but this time, Mom was already asleep. So, I crossed the hall to my sister’s room. The first time, I wanted her permission to keep reading because a character had mentioned hell, and not in a Christian way. The second time I visited her, she had less patience.

“You need to decide for yourself,” she told me, sending me back to my room. I took that advice and stayed up for the rest of the night, transfixed by a world of vampires. The next morning in church, the book occupied my mind. My legs faltered, and a flash of heat coursed through my chest, forcing me to sit down in the middle of worship. I couldn’t be sure if the reaction was due to exhaustion or guilt for indulging in the likes of Edward Cullen. Even so, I couldn’t wait for the service to be over so I could go home and finish.

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Our rite of passage came around adolescence. When I got old enough, Mom surprised me with an invitation for a girl’s weekend, just the two of us. We got to stay in a hotel and go through a program called *Passport to Purity*. The thin booklet described sexual temptation as being perched on the edge of a cliff. The more we gave in, the closer we got to peril. One section asked the reader to commit to how much he or she would risk. Would it be a kiss, or cuddling? I didn’t learn sex in terms of scoring a home run. I learned it as an action that would send me over the cliff’s edge, and as a conscientious twelve-year-old, I valued my safety. I declared I wouldn’t even hold hands with a boy and signed my name on the dotted line.

After completing the program during our girl’s weekend, each of us received purity rings to mark our commitment. Cassie had the largest gathering to celebrate the occasion. Invitations went out to members of church, and they and other friends filled all of the chairs that stretched from the living room through the dining room, and back into the kitchen. They nearly took up the entire downstairs, all dressed up like on a Sunday morning.

Lexi had a more subdued ceremony. Our family friends came over for the evening, during which my dad delivered a too-formal message considering the smattering of people present. The most memorable part of the night came when our Boston Terrier, Phoebe, interrupted his sermon. She did a slow belly crawl across the middle of the room, unimpressed by the formality of it all. Dad was the only one unamused.

By the time my turn came, I had a small dinner with family and my best friend who’d been visiting from out of state. For the third time, we listened to Dad’s sermon on purity, and my friend couldn’t even meet my eyes for fear of bursting into laughter.

I wasn’t as unaware as that fish of the water that I swam in. I knew from my interactions at church and at dance that courtship and purity deviated from the norm. I took comfort knowing
there were more extreme cases than our family, though. For instance, we once attended the purity ceremony of twin boys. They were part of a large family of homeschoolers who embodied the stereotypes associated with that identity. Like the gathering assembled for Cassie, the ceremony brought in many people. When the time came for the boys to receive the symbol of their purity, their parents pulled out what could only be fit for young males: not rings, but life-sized swords, presumably with which to fend off the temptation of attractive women.

In my understanding, we celebrated purity but never discussed why we valued it. We threw grand celebrations of abstinence but didn’t know what we were abstaining from. I only knew that when I turned 13, I could pick out a pretty ring and daydream about the day a man would replace it with another. As my friends entered relationships and I remained single, I assured myself that the perfect guy would come along if only I waited. Like Snow White said, “Someday my prince will come.” I lived in the someday maybe’s and navigated other areas of my life in a similar fashion. The church taught me to prepare for the futures of marriage and Heaven, but I didn’t find nearly as much instruction for the waiting besides stay good and don’t mess anything up. So, I found myself stepping gingerly, always afraid that my next step might send me over that cliff’s edge.

Prayers Said and Blood Shed

I thought I’d grow out of my scars.

I didn’t realize I’d be making new ones

There are red lines on my skin,

the aftermath of scratches.

My body took a flake of the pain my soul feels.

There’s a verse about taking every thought captive,
but I need direction for the times that the opposite happens.

I woke up with only moments before a turmoil stirred in my chest,
churning in the cavity that houses heart and lung.

How do I rearrange the letters into a word that
describes this inexplicable ache in my soul,
so persistent as it nestles deep within me that my mind
can only manage feeble attempts at distraction
before it undoubtedly sinks in the mire?

It lingers ever still.

This presence.

This thing that I would shed like a second skin
if it wasn’t entrapped in my first,
tucked beneath the sinews in my hidden caverns and
Crevices. I want to heal.

Not merely “get better.”

We chase better but don’t realize that means leaving behind
and condemning the self we are right now.

We can’t shed ourselves like an amphibian sheds
its skin. I seek the healing that will transform
this self into one more true.

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Being the youngest, I didn’t have to go through the traumatizing experience of waking up
to an unknown stream of blood between my legs. By the time my first period visited, I’d already
seen my sisters go through it. But I hardly viewed it as the rite of passage some describe. I was prepared, but I wasn’t happy. During the first week of that hellish ordeal, I put myself in quarantine in the downstairs bathroom where I sat, sobbing and going through enough toilet paper to grieve an environmentalist. My dad pressed against the door on the other side.

“You need to help her, Teri,” he said. The combination of hormones and blood were enough to make him frantic.

I doubt my mom even lifted her gaze as she said, “She needs to learn to get over it.” I think she also told me to stop using so much toilet paper.

That’s how it usually went with my parents. My dad would be the first to jump up at the mention of an ailment. If you went to dad, he’d want to go to the hospital. If you went to mom, she’d say wait a day and come back to her if it still hurt.

I saw the impracticality behind my dad’s response, but I wasn’t satisfied with Mom’s answer either, always convinced that if I waited too long I could die.

Of the many movies we saw growing up, we watched all of the *Mission Impossible* ones together. In the third installment, a woman ends up dying. She had an implant in her, a little bomb that went off and obliterated her brain while Tom Cruise held her in his arms. After watching that, I was convinced that I’d somehow been implanted with a similar bomb. I pestered Mom after the movie ended, complaining of a headache that proved I’d been compromised.

And I really believed it. Just like I wondered if I contracted a rare disease when my lips got especially chapped this past winter or if I somehow gave myself an STD by shaving down there without sterilizing the razor first. So, I guess I can understand why my mom developed the practiced response of wait, and if it still hurts, come back later. When I die, though, no matter
how I go, I want this inscription on my tombstone, a special shout-out to my mother. It will read:

*I told you I was sick.*

I’ve asked my mom about the test results to that MRI I got all those years ago. I couldn’t ignore this nagging thought that maybe my parents were the kind to withhold information like irreparable brain damage from their child. Mom only scoffed. Of course nothing happened, she told me.

I asked because I needed a reason or at least a name for the tangle in my brain. The trouble with having a mental illness in conjunction with a deeply embedded faith was that I was never quite sure if I suffered from a chemical imbalance or if a demon found a way to nestle in my head for over a decade. As long as I didn’t prod, it *could’ve* been a demon, but it could also not be. Either way, I dared not provoke it because as much as I believed in the power of prayer, I was terrified that when the time came to use it, I might discover it didn’t come through after all.

Christianity can be a tricky thing. It settles in the mind like an old memory so that one doesn’t feel the need to revisit it or unpack it. The truths of Sunday school, as often said, were never meant to be simplified to a five-minute presentation on flannel graph. One of those truths was about the nature of Jesus’ visit to earth. A long time coming, He was meant to descend in enough glory and wrath to obliterate the Romans. Instead, he tumbled out among the shadows into a manger.

“Away in a Manger” was one of my favorite songs to sing as a child because my Sunday school class got to perform it in front of the entire church. I stood up on the stage in a bright crimson jumper with a long-sleeved white shirt, hair tucked into twin braids as I let my arms sway back and forth to cradle an invisible child, the Savior of the world. Jesus inhabited the margins for the rest of His life, which became a truth with delayed significance for me.
The other tricky part of Christianity is the Bible and the way one can read it for one’s entire life without quite knowing what it says. My grasp of evil had its foundation in my education of the Christian faith. In Sunday school, I listened with growing trepidation as the teacher talked about Saul, the man who hated Christians so much he actively hunted them down. I sat still in my seat; I wasn’t a Christian, but I had no way of knowing this man wouldn’t still seek me out, capture me, and have me killed.

Whatever emotion registered on my five-year-old face, one of the teachers leaned in to whisper, “Do you want to become a Christian?”

I often wonder why I nodded my head. After hearing what I did, agreeing to accept this label was as good as signing my own death warrant. The teacher led me out to the hall, and I suppose I forgot my fear when everyone cheered at my decision, or when I learned Saul had turned into the apostle Paul, and either way had been dead for thousands of years.

But apprehension never strayed for too long. One evening, I knelt by the bed with my parents after studying the Bible. I was still learning about the figures of faith, like Saul-turned-Paul and others. That night, we discussed Satan. Trying to understand how he fit into the hierarchy, I asked, “So, is he the king of hell?” The question rattled through me as though for the first time, I realized a force existed that wasn’t good like God, and the force seemed to realize me for the first time that night too.

The nightmares began shortly after. Anything could trigger my fear, and that era became a time of movies stopped halfway through because they were too scary, and the door cracked exactly two inches at bedtime to let in the light. While I dreaded the moment my eyes would shut, I took comfort in a sign that hung above my door, light pink and laminated with a cluster of angels that had blond hair and big eyes. Beneath them were written two verses from Psalms with
something of a promise that God would watch over me. The angels and their verses offered me safety in those times that I began to understand how little control I had over my mind.

Years later, the nightmares have turned into a persistent ache in the cavity that houses heart and lungs. I started one morning in college in a fetal position and silent tears. The anxiety embedded itself in me long before I reached consciousness so that it was the first thing to greet me when I woke up. The roiling of my stomach. The slick, constant sweat on my hands. The persistent twitching of different parts of my body because it just couldn’t stay at rest. These all crested and fell throughout the day until the bloody event was over and done with.

That day was different, though. The tears, they usually came with the emptiness of depression or the accusing thoughts of whatever source is to blame for the voice in my head. But they emerged that day alongside agitation. I was angry, sick of waking up to this gnawing ache and having it plague my every thought and minute of the day. It was the flavor always stuck in my throat, but couldn’t shove down.

I laid in my bed trying not to be angry at God for not taking it away from me while simultaneously pleaded Philippians 4:6-7 to him: peace that surpasses understanding. Please give me peace that surpasses understanding. I didn’t dare unleash my frustration against Him, because I knew another verse: His grace is sufficient for me, for His power is made perfect in my weakness. I knew this. I’d seen it when His peace had indeed invaded my life and driven out the anxiety. But must it happen every time? Why must I endure the parasite to receive the peace?

That day wasn’t special, but it was the end of my patience. And the more I dwelled on it, the more it built until I had to jump up from the bed and leave the room lest my two roommates across the room caught sight of the tears. But when I returned to an empty room, I still couldn’t find my way out. The sickness I kept imagining in my stomach became real in the power of my
imagination. My muscles contracted and thrust, trying to eject substance from my body that it couldn’t conjure up. After all, I’d hardly been eating since starting the medication. There was nothing to throw up but I sat and heaved until my throat turned raw. And while I coughed, my head turned light and dizzy, and I wondered if my breath would be the next to leave me.

I’m at turns thankful and terrified to know I have anxiety and depression. These labels have brought me comfort. Suddenly, it’s not my fault that I dissolve into an unresponsive mess when confronted with a challenge or fade into my mind to war with a voice I cannot see. If I can point to something like anxiety and depression, then that means those things exist outside of me, that they are separate entities apart from the core of my personhood. It’s far more troubling to think that I have an inherent problem that’s fused to my DNA. Then, I’m somehow at fault yet still out of control.

But, the relief only lasts until I remember what kind of world I live in. It’s a world where having a mental illness means I’m not the only one affected. It means not that other people have to be careful with how they treat me and make sure they cater to my needs but where I need to own up to my faults and take ownership of this struggle, whether I wanted it or not. And it scares me now, but it terrifies me more to think of growing older into a mother who might become the struggle of my children. What kind of life could I give them if I’m stumbling through my own? I hear stories of children who must work hard to overcome the experience of having a mentally ill parent, and my heart aches for them. And it aches for the parent, knowing that even in family, they have not found a complete home, that mental illness has cursed them to be a burden within their surroundings. I wonder if that’s what’s in store for me.

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I had a special language with God. Every time I lost something, as I habitually did, I would pray and find it soon after. I adored this connection we shared because it had more meaning than seeing Him work on the large scale of grand miracles. Right there in my cluttered room, He cared enough to help me find my wallet before Mom got too angry. As I got older, I thought He was teaching me more of our special language.

I began noticing things in my path, a pinecone or a twig, and I couldn’t pass them by because if I did, someone else might come along, trip, and die. I first took this mission very seriously, pausing for every speck I saw in my path. If I tried to walk past, I wouldn’t get far before the weight of someone’s hypothetical death would crush my chest. I’d turn around and kick the stone away, like I should’ve done the first time. I noticed other ways I could be a part of God’s work. When I went shopping, I ducked to the ground every time I spotted a fallen hangar or piece of clothing.

“Just leave it alone,” Lexi snapped once when I knelt to pick up one too many hangars in the clothing section of a Target.

I couldn’t say no, though the work began to exhaust me. If I tried, my mind would flash to someone’s death or a verse would reverberate through my memory: “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.” I knew I ought to keep people from dying if I could help it. So, I continued clearing the way.

I also received the charge to pray for people I passed by. For anyone I’d see, whether a living being or a picture of one, I’d utter a quick prayer that they’d come to know God. It was a small thing I could do, if I couldn’t directly impact their lives. But what started as a few selected people turned into every face I came across. I launched into a scripted prayer of salvation every time I saw someone new until my mind raced in unceasing prayer that drained me. The words
became mechanical, devoid of emotional investment. Yet if I stopped, I risked dooming someone
to hell. My sanity seemed a small price to pay for someone’s salvation. That obligation, or
responsibility, is what sent me back to wash my hands when I feared spreading bacteria to a
susceptible bystander. When living on my own in an apartment, I retraced my steps to the oven
many times over, always worried I’d accidentally burn the building down and everyone in it. I
labored and ached over my actions, that they might cause someone’s downfall, so I strove
towards the perfection I could never attain but that might hopefully relieve some of the guilt I
Carried.

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As the youngest in the family, homeschooled, and a Christian, I was many layers of
sheltered. But during one sleepover, I convinced my friends to tell me about the middle finger.
After that night, I felt like I carried a weapon attached to my hand. I didn’t know what to do with
it. As conservative Christians, we’d had it instilled in us that letting expletives through our lips
was a sin, a reflection of some inner hostility, and every time my middle finger pointed towards
someone or something, I worried that I released a bit of that sin. I tried tucking my hands into the
crease of my elbows but quickly realized they pointed at people on either side of me. To hold
them upwards would aim the bird at God while even the ground and hell below seemed
undeserving of getting flipped off. I didn’t know where I could place my hands safely, and that’s
how I navigated a lot of my faith.

Idolatry was listed as one of the Great Ten No-No’s, so I had to take extra care while
praying to fix my mind on God. The only trouble is, no one knows what God looks like. My
most familiar image of Him depicts Him as a muscular sort of Santa Claus and Jesus as a pale,
long-haired man. I could try to fixate on just the combination of letters that made the word
“God,” but all of these felt like holding up a mental version of the golden calf. I could be condemned in the same way that group of Christians got into trouble for creating icons.

I tried to take my faith seriously. There’s a passage in the Bible, I’m not sure where, that gives a warning about communion. Sometime since first hearing it the details got lost, but the idea is this: if someone takes communion with sin still in their heart, God will strike them down and may not guarantee them a spot in Heaven. And if that seemed unrealistic, I had only to look at a certain man who’d touched the Ark of the Covenant and died to know that God took these things seriously.

Communion became a sort of Pavlov’s bell. Anytime I entered the church and saw the table at the front of the room, with a goblet of juice and a loaf of bread, dread would flood my chest. I knew I had half an hour to prepare myself. The songs and sermon would be lost on me as I pleaded before God to forgive every sin I’d ever committed. I’d lean over to my family members with a repentant heart, trying to alleviate the burden before I’d have to stand and join the line moving to the front. My apologies would continue as we inched forward. Sorry for yelling at Mom. Sorry for thinking bad thoughts about Alexis. Sorry for getting distracted just now. Sorry for pointing my middle finger at the person before me. Sorry for looking away. Sorry for not thinking of your name. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Eventually, I didn’t know what I apologized for or why, only that I must. This would continue until I’d reach the front, where church leaders would hold the bread and tear off a chunk for me.

“This is the body of Christ, broken for you.”

I’d dip it in the grape juice.

“The blood of Christ, shed for you.”
I never knew how to behave in these moments, with strangers uttering such grave truths. In my uncertainty, I’d sometimes nod and say thank you, then feel stupid for thanking these strangers when I should’ve been thanking Jesus for His sacrifice. I’d utter another apology. But the awkwardness couldn’t hold my attention for long. Technically, it still wasn’t too late, not when I made the trek back to my seat. Sometimes, even after I popped the soggy bread into my mouth, I would hold it on my tongue so I could get out some last-minute apologies. But eventually, the time came when I’d have to mobilize my jaw and force the soaking sponge down my throat. Then, I’d wait. See if I passed the test, if I would live another day without getting struck down. I’d relax in my seat with the realization that I could go another day without incurring God’s wrath. The euphoria and fear would be forgotten by the time we got to the car after service, only to resurface the next time I saw the high table planted at the front of the church, signaling another day I’d have to risk my life.

There was a time I almost didn’t emerge unscathed. With the growth of my maturity and faith, I realized I didn’t have to partake in communion every time. If I couldn’t expunge the sin entirely by the time the call came, I resolved to sit in my seat. I did so one Sunday at a church in North Carolina. Mom wasn’t there, and it was just my dad, Lexi and me. As people began shuffling from their seats, I retreated to the bathroom as people began to fold down the aisle. I was prepared to wait it out. But when I emerged, my dad stood on the other side of the door. When I told him I wasn’t going to take communion that day, he insisted that I couldn’t withdraw. The panic began to set in. While others made the solemn remembrance, I stood behind a wall with my dad, arguing furiously about my participation. He didn’t understand that my soul was at stake. I ended up losing out, marching up to the front with tear-stained eyes as I prepared to partake in what felt like the greatest sin. Worse, I probably didn’t even have time to ask
forgiveness for the fight I’d just had with my dad, let alone for the feeling bordering on hate that I harbored against him for making me go up there.

A Tangled History

*My Sunday school teachers used colors to help us learn the concepts of our faith. Purple stood for the royalty of Jesus, the son of God who had a kingdom in Heaven. We would slip a purple bead onto the string of the bracelet we were making. Next, we had a red bead, which stood for the blood of Christ shed for our sins. If he hadn’t died, we’d all sink into death, symbolized by black. Green was new life; blue the living water. And the white bead represented the purity we attained through right belief. By believing in Jesus, our sins would be washed white as snow.*

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Every three months marked my turn to ride down to the salon where each trip tamed tumbleweed fluff into a somewhat more manageable flop. Hair relaxation could take up to an hour or more, yet I didn’t mind. I felt sophisticated when I could casually mention to my friends that I had to go get my hair done. Unusual to them, it was also all I knew.

Mom dreamed of the day she’d have daughters so she could do their hair, but she hadn’t anticipated the task it would become. Hair was never just “hair” for me and my sisters. Our blend of black and white genetic material required a series of experimentations. I’m too young to remember every attempt, but I’ve seen the home videos enough to know my sister’s hair had been the casualty of one such endeavor. In one scene on Christmas morning, a three-year old Lexi reluctantly emerges from the dark hall, her head shorn. I didn’t have to withstand the botched attempts. By the time I arrived, my mom had settled on an option that worked for her three daughters, and that was hair relaxation.
I could tell when I was due for a new relaxation. By that time, the chemicals from the previous trip had faded, leaving the unpredictable strands to buck their constraints. The curls that I inherited from my black side only made an appearance after a shower when they’d drip with water in slick coils, but they’d disappear by the time I had my hair dry and straightened between the pads of a flat iron. The longer I went without a new treatment, the more my hair would fluff up, becoming thicker and thicker like cotton candy. I couldn’t tame it on my own.

So I went to the salon, where my hairdresser would pin a cape beneath my neck and move about with a container of cream in one hand and a fine-toothed comb in the other. With slick strokes, she painted my scalp white until the cream covered my dark roots. Pulling out a timer, she’d wind it up and set it on the counter. As soon as it stopped ticking, I could have my hair washed out and dried into pliable strands. I was to tell my hairdresser if the cream surpassed its boundaries, making my nerves wiggle. Only the prickling reminded me of the chemicals strong enough to wilt my roots into submission. But I didn’t like to speak up. In my shyness, I relied on my mom to draw the conversation away, and took so long to build up the courage to speak that the irritation of the chemicals often turned into a persistent burn. During one visit, my silence gave way to a conversation I’d never heard before, about my parents and the life they’d had before me.

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Children during the Civil Rights Movement, neither of my parents remember much about the period they mostly spent in diapers. Mom didn’t really even know the name of Martin Luther King Jr. until adulthood when she attended a church service in his honor. Even Dad and his family didn’t involve themselves in the efforts, imbedded as they were in the South. He watched the happenings on a square television screen, but his parents made his priorities clear: school and
prayer. When social engagement seemed to distract from the Kingdom of God, Dad’s parents made sure to steer clear, and he passed that down to us. Unbeknownst to my parents, though, two other reluctant figures of the Civil Rights Movement were making changes that would later impact my young parents’ lives, and my own.

Richard and Mildred Loving grew up in a small town in Virginia in the ‘30s and ‘40s. Having known each other when young, they got married as adults and began their lives together. In 1958, a lifetime of marital bliss was cut short when police officers raided their house in the night and arrested them on the spot, claiming they had broken the law by marrying. The officers were right, for Mildred was a woman of color, Richard was white, and Virginia had a history of anti-miscegenation laws that stretched back as far as 1662.

The couple went quietly at first, moving to D.C. where they could live together without disruption. They wanted to return home, though. That simple yet profound desire prompted them to seek out lawyers who would swiftly take their case before the Supreme Court. In 1967, the Loving’s won the right to love each other and made it possible for other interracial couples to do the same. Twenty years removed from the tension of the Civil Rights Movement, my parents shouldn’t have run into the same issues the Loving’s faced. No one dragged them from their home in the night. But plenty of people still had their opinions about a couple like my parents.

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A white woman born and raised in Central PA, Mom had moved down to Atlanta after a couple years of college in New York. The two black guys she dated there eased her into black culture. Before long, she was listening to black music, befriending black women, and trying to speak like black people.
Then, one of the guys she dated introduced her to drugs. Weed and cocaine became a part of their lives, and Mom wanted out. The job opportunity that opened in Atlanta was a chance to start anew, so she cut ties with her boyfriend and moved down south with a friend. Co-workers and roommates, the two women began spending time with the people in their office, going out to clubs and mingling. It was at one of those clubs that Mom met the guy she was dating when she saw my dad in the wedding video.

By the time my parents met, Mom had already been introduced to the culture of blackness. She was dating a black guy at the time that she spotted my Dad in the wedding video of mutual friends. She thought he was cute.

“We can only be friends,” she told my dad, and that’s how they started out. But when her boyfriend cheated on her, Dad was there to catch her. That was in October. By January, he’d propose, and by May she’d be in a white dress that had enough room to accommodate the growing baby in her belly. Cassie would come into the world less than a year after they first started dating.

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The stories of racial hostility seemed like fiction to Mom. They never really touched her until she went out with my dad. Even for him, racism existed more in the news than in his reality. It started with a couple of incidents. When my parents went to see a movie, they noticed stares that surpassed curiosity. Clearly, the people milling around out front condemned this couple with mismatched skin tones. My parents didn’t see any movie that night - they drove away without ever stepping foot outside of the car. The next time it happened, they had stopped at a donut shop on their way down to Florida. While Dad wasn’t looking, a man aimed a carefully chosen finger
at them. Mom waited until they made it back on the highway to tell Dad and still had to convince him not to turn the car around.

The distaste from mere strangers also leaked through personal relationships. Family on either side couldn’t grasp why their children loved someone of a different color. As my mom spoke in the salon that day, I heard about the grandad I’d never known. I’d never heard about the years of silence between him and my family because he couldn’t accept his daughter’s black husband. My mom talked about how one Christmas, he began to thaw as he prepared a card to send my mother who now had two little girls and another not yet born. The hope of reconciliation was bound up in that slip of a paper. He died before it was sent.

I didn’t know if she meant for me to hear these stories or simply forgot that I was still there, waiting with the cream on my head. Yet I was the reason she was there in the salon, having to seek out a hairdresser who knew how to take care of biracial hair. My existence as the synthesis of two colors meant my white mother birthed children who made it more difficult to say, “Oh she has your eyes or your nose,” because one trait would always alter the connection people saw between me and my mom: my skin. Interruptions in the grocery store became commonplace, humorous if not unnatural.

“Where did you get your babies?” people would ask her, as though there had been a deal on aisle three.

As ordinary as the question became, I rarely processed what it meant. The only time we talked about race as a family is when my sisters and I were told that we were raised “neither black nor white.”

***
Though the chemical relaxer made the roots more manageable, Mom still had to carve out three hours of her week - one for each of us - to attend to our heads. The process would begin in the bathtub, where Mom would wash and condition, making sure to moisturize our dry locks. When I was really little, Dad would kneel next to the tub, holding my hand as I sobbed at the water dumped over my head.

Once dry, we’d migrate to my parents’ bedroom. They had a desk-dresser where Mom would set up shop for the evening. There’d be a dark blue cup that held the clips and combs. The leave-in conditioner and various gels would find a spot up there as well. And the heating tools would perch on the edge, ready to be used when needed. Uncoiling the towel from my head, Mom would begin working through the damp curls, spraying and combing in turn, sectioning off pieces with her collection of clips. She methodically worked through each section as she first blew it dry and then doubled back with the hot pads of the flat iron.

Over the years, her hands must have come to know well the shapes of our heads. Her fingers became intimate with the textured strands of our hair. Listening to her describe the process, I expected resentment to fall from her lips at the obligation put on her as our mother. But when each of us got old enough to take care of our own hair, it wasn’t relief Mom felt, but a sense of loss for those moments spent together, mother and daughter suspended in time as she brushed through the strands of hair.

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It was difficult to pinpoint home, even before I left it for college. I think as an abstraction, it ought to have some level of consistency that counteracts the shifts of life cycles. For me, home took on such a transient quality, it became any place I settled for any given time. If we were on vacation, to return to the hotel would be to go home. Home always meant to go back, but I’ve
lost that sense in the place I’ve called home for the past 8 years. My parents sold our house right after I graduated from high school. The walls were already bare when we had guests over for the celebratory party.

I spent the interim summer with my mom in an apartment, the first one with my name on the lease. But it was an environment more hospitable to invading cockroaches than me, and the cramped space that allowed in minimal amounts of natural light hardly felt like a space of comfort. I soon escaped to college.

Halfway through that first year, I learned that my parents had finally gotten divorced. It had been a long time coming. My dad hadn’t even lived with us for my last year of high school. He had gotten a job in Iowa, but we hadn’t even created the illusion that my mom would join him after I left for college. The two always seemed happier when separated, and I suppose I learned to be content with the accord we all struck. The divorce shouldn’t have rattled me the way it did. I blame my uncle for his delivery. I’d gone over to my aunt and uncle’s house for my birthday dinner. They live in a split-level house, with the kitchen half a level above the living room and entrance to the house.

I walked in and called a greeting to them, and my uncle called out, “Did you hear what your dad got for Valentine’s Day?”

My aunt is my mom’s half-sister; my uncle made family by marriage. I played along.

“No, what?”

“Divorce papers.”

I was suddenly glad for the distance between me and my uncle; I needed a moment to compose myself and offer an obligatory smile and laugh, though I think I might have only managed a startled, “Oh.”
I’m still trying to figure out why the finality of it all has made my life feel so suddenly disrupted. My parents didn’t have a good marriage. I’m more surprised to hear about happy memories than to recall the fighting and tension.

So, home has not been in people, either. Not when instability began to redefine my relationship to this idea of going back. The hardest part of the divorce was not because I wanted my parents to fall in love (maybe for the first time), but because the situation had created a massive inconvenience in my life. Now, I had to reconfigure who and where I would go back to.

The biggest lie in my life right now is that I have any control. I’ve felt the lie nailed into my chest with divorce, remarriage, and the distance not chosen by me. I grasp at air. As though I could push oxygen into my desperate lungs because it damn well may have been a year since they’ve inflated with anything but the dust left by long gone bodies.

Yet, I’ve had so much sacrificed for me. I used to keep a mental tab that I’d add on to every time my parents got something for me. At times, I would literally write down the item and price in a notebook. Most of the items have faded from memory, but I know for a fact that I still owe my parents for the pastel pink polo and multi-colored striped skirt they bought for me from Old Navy. It was close to Easter, and I wasn’t supposed to get a new outfit that year. But my sister tried on the ensemble first, and she had earned the new outfit. I just guilted my parents into buying the matching one for me, determined to pay them back later. I don’t know if I ever fully intended to pay them back, though, or if I just wanted to ease the guilt from a lifetime of unpayable debt I’ve racked up.

My mom always says, “pay me back by treating your children this way.” But I don’t want to think of my children, who will shift the roles so that I’m the mom and my mom is a
grandmother. I don’t want to pay it forward but pay it back. I want to love my mom as hard as she’s loved me, but that’s a relationship that’s destined to remain unequal.

I’ve compared it to the love God has for people. In one moment, the sheer inequality might inspire awe, but there are other times I think the whole thing is just futile. Why try to love when it can never be enough to repay what’s been given to me?

Skin Deep

We didn’t talk about race

The color of our face-s

Is something we didn’t ponder

didn’t wonder why the tan came

So naturally unlike our hair so kinky

It had to be tamed cause it took

Up so much space

No, we didn’t talk about race.

***

Black was banned in my house. Not intentionally. It was simply mere coincidence that Christian values and all the tv shows with black people in them never seemed to intersect. I knew of the Proud Family, That’s So Raven, and Twitches, but we couldn’t go near any of the supernatural stuff that filled the content of those shows. By the time Princess and the Frog came out, I had internalized enough piety to view voodoo practices with disgust. And it’s not like we discriminated against talking black. My devotion to “correct English” simply held me back from ain’t never’s (that’s a double negative). The odor of collard greens was enough to keep me
content with other choices. These were the things I knew to be black, but they seemed incompatible with my life.

I suppose my sisters and I were lucky to grow up in the time that we did: the age of exoticism and fetishism. Our skin was the coveted shade people craved during the summer time. People noticed our difference, and they desired it. My hair didn’t lie in flat waves or spiral in tame curls, but its volume attracted petting hands. At one of my friend’s birthday parties, her friends took turns stroking my head, making me feel special as they talked about my soft, fluffy hair.

As I learned when I stepped into college, lighter was in larger demand from the world, and achingly, from myself. I kept a tentative grasp on this piece of my identity and made it an object to use to my advantage. I rolled my eyes whenever I heard about the stereotypical “black woman attitude.” Yet I’m the same person who grew up thinking that my black half gave me claim to snapping my fingers with sass or pretending that I had an inherent sense of rhythmic movement because of my black half. I remembered my blackness when I needed to make myself feel diverse, cultured, but I only did it when it was convenient for me. When I wanted to feel educated, when I wanted to feel people’s respect, I would cling to my white half. And as I did to myself, others did to me.

As I learned to unwind the terms that color our society, I learned to unfurl the experiences not just of my dark skin, but of a murkiness that had nothing to do with pigmentation. A prickling worked its way into my consciousness, growing into a persistent burn when I realized that whatever silencing people had done to one half of me, I’d already done to myself. It’d been so logical to order my calendar by the three-month appointments that would
bring me to the salon where my roots would disappear in order for my hair to become tame in its unnatural constraints.

My other hairdresser used to parade me around the salon, showing off my hair as her finished product. By that point, my stubborn hair now moved with ease, swinging effortlessly as I walked from person to person so they could examine her hard work. Some black women would offer a compliment: “It looks nice,” only to then admonish, “But you should go natural. The chemicals are bad for you.” I used to bristle beneath my quiet smile. I wanted to tell them I was happy with my chemical-ridden hair. It was Lupita Nyong’o who convinced me when others could not. Making her debut in *12 Years a Slave*, this woman with grace and poise played a different role in my life, whether she meant to or not. In her, I saw what had been silent and absent during my childhood. She was black. She was beautiful. She showed that both could exist when for so long I had forsaken my claim to the pain of my ancestors, yes, but also to the rich beauty of a culture that looked foreign and distant to me. How could I discuss structural oppression in class when I had yet to acknowledge the way I silenced this half of me? And so, I craved a visible sign that I wanted to explore this other part of myself, and that desire brought me back to the hairdresser’s chair.

Again, my mom joined me, drifting into conversation as the hairdresser pruned my floppy tendrils into coils that clung to my scalp. I insisted on keeping my back to the mirror. I tried to ignore that my Mom compared me to a poodle halfway through the chopping. I reminded myself to be satisfied no matter how I looked. Yet when I turned around, my eyes jumped to the doughy cheeks, the narrow eyes, a face exposed without its mane. Unsure exactly what I felt, I at least realized that I could no longer hide who I was.
But my hair didn’t change only the way I looked. My hair gave other black women a reason to talk to me, and I began appreciating the comments from women I’d bump into. We talked hair products, discussing which brands we’d tried. With a comment to my curls, strangers drew me into a sisterhood akin to the brotherhood my dad accessed with a nod and a “Hey, brother” to another black man in passing. Even a visit to my dad’s sisters – whom I see so infrequently that I’ve only just now could place a name to a face with any confidence – gave me a tie to bind us somehow more concretely than the label of family. Instead of forced conversation, we could speak about this visible bond of hair. My curls let me explore a part of myself I’d silenced for so long. I hadn’t realized how much those tangles on my head were tangled up with my identity.

The Disillusionment of Womanhood

In the height of my youth, I believed the best thing I could be was a woman. Often, I thought to myself how lucky I was to be able to wear dresses, play with Barbies, and have it all submerged in various layers of pink. These were my symbols of femininity. Taking one look at the violent games and what I considered to be the dull colors usually attributed to boys, I sniffed dismissively and returned to my American Girl dolls. I respected my role models, any one of Disney’s iconic princesses whose stories illuminated the multiple pathways to true love. I also practiced my hopeful future, perfecting the art of domesticity with my toy Dirt Devil vacuum or miniature kitchen. My favorite part of parenting to a growing number of baby dolls was pregnancy. Even when it came time for “labor,” I would tuck that floppy pillow back beneath my shirt and start the process all over again. I loved what it meant to be a woman. But as I grew older and chased after this identity, the allure of my youth unraveled into the disenchantment of my womanhood.
At some point, I traded my pillow in for a floral scarf, soft to the touch yet sturdy enough to cinch around my waist. Knotting it tightly and hiding it beneath my shirt, I got what I wanted: an instant waistline. Lugging the scale down from my parent’s bedroom, I’d pop in a VHS and spend the next thirty minutes dancing out aerobics. Then, I’d step on the scale. I’ve never been one for numbers, but even at age eight or nine, I knew the lower the better. I watched other videos of ballet dancers online, mimicking their steps in the space between furniture in the living room of my house.

My favorite dance movie showed me through the main character Jodie how hours of dance practice should end in bloodied feet. I wondered how long I would have to pound the floor in my canvassed feet before I would have my own blisters to show. It wasn’t the pain itself I sought after but the same results I saw play out in the movie. After putting in hours of work punctuated by disappointment and feelings of inadequacy, Jodie reappeared in a captivating blaze that had less to do with the fiery skirt she wore and everything to do with the newfound confidence her hard-earned technique gave her. In the last scene of her piece, she rotated on the two-inch wide platform of a pointe shoe, pumping her body around with strength and grace. It was this image that I chased after, one that I didn’t mind embodying through some torn up feet. At least, I thought I wouldn’t mind.

The disappointment began when I received my first pair of pointe shoes and learned that the satin ribbons did not, as a matter of fact, lace up my calves but seemed to puddle at my ankles. Already, that first pair of wooden blocks didn’t feel magical. Neither did my second or third, or really any. The shoes that represented a tool for aesthetic artistry also became the bearer of my pain. It didn’t take long before I hobbled up to my teacher after class, asking, “Is it
supposed to hurt this bad?” The amusement on her face reminded me to accept, even welcome, this crucial step in my journey as a ballerina.

Even as they became commonplace, each blister ached with the reminder of a lesson that refused to sink in. I struggled to equate beauty with pain when the blood spouted from my foot and onto the carpet of my studio’s dressing room. I would never quite become immune to the chafing of rough raw fabric against raw wound. But I continued to wrap up my toes, slide them back into my pointe shoes and rise above my height. I did this because signs of effort had no place on the stage. I needed to master this truth because I wanted the beauty of a ballerina, one who could practice a *tendu* and *rond de jambe*, and convey grace in a body inhabited by pain. Until the moment I laid my last pair of pointe shoes to rest, I maintained a tenuous relationship with the objects that brought me injury, irritation, and occasional bouts of agony. I could justify my choices through the discipline and growth I gleaned from my life of dance. As I noticed this pattern emerge in my growth as a woman, I had a harder time answering this question.

I strove to be that woman who embodied elegance, acknowledging that neither a leotard nor an audience would forgive an illusion broken by the indelicacy of extra weight in a dancer’s body. My body. Before I even touched a make-up brush or bought my first pair of flattering leggings, I invested in the beauty I could manipulate by missing a few meals. I dedicated myself to the research of finding the lowest-calorie options to eat. The books I had aimed too high, advising over a thousand calories. I could do better. I shaved it down to seven hundred and fifty carefully selected calories. Making sure not to stray, I measured cereal at breakfast, weighed my lunch, and ignored hunger until dinner.

This was my legacy to inherit, my right doubly as a woman and a dancer. While Twiggy’s lanky body modeled a new standard of beauty for those outside the dancer’s world,
George Balanchine’s legacy advanced on me, whittling me down to his idea of a beautiful dancer. My fingers groped over my body in search of bone, retracting with disgust when I found cushy flesh instead. Beauty was not something to be, but to chase, and so I did. I charged after a beauty synonymous with the willowy form of a true dancer.

Shower time became inspection time, the curtain becoming refuge when the reflection in the mirror got to be too much. Even when those elusive ribs finally peeked out and the number dipped on the scale, the bones didn’t protrude enough. I told myself that I would never force vomit, so it was a good thing none came up when I broke my promise and prodded the back of my throat anyway.

Even as my body eventually outgrew the constraints I’d put on it, I would never stop craving the reassurance of my worth, and part of that need grew from a desire to be loved. I remembered the role models of my youth and how young Ariel forfeited all for the sake of love, but then I realized the true scope of her wager. She traded in her voice, her body, and her species for a life with a man. Would this too be my payment? I thought of Belle who gave herself up for her father and happened to find love too. Only, I hadn’t noticed how that pursuit first demanded a sacrifice of her freedom that then resulted in care for her captor. Would I have to take that same risk, giving myself up to a man and gambling on good fortune?

“Be beautiful,” I was told and tried to be. But I received no instruction when the weight of a gaze pressed down on me, making me regret picking out an outfit that gave me a rare bit of confidence. The moment I felt someone’s stare, I berated myself for choosing an outfit that showed my legs so much. In the tension of passing men on the street, I couldn’t help but feel the weight of inevitability, the statistics making me wonder if my time had come every time a cat call on the street made me freeze. Often craving validation, I still abhorred the men who called to
me as I passed by. Every time, I froze up. My face became a mask of contempt even as my brain registered fear, then anger once I’ve safely avoided interaction. In the aftermath, I felt guilty that I wasn’t kinder. I felt guilty that I saw reason for fear instead of reason for love. I felt guilty that I felt a morsel of satisfaction that put me at odds with my own self-preservation. I couldn’t ignore the anger that lingered every time I thought of a man who treated his comments like a gracious compliment to be bestowed upon me or any other woman. But the frustration I drowned in was the kind turned toward myself when I could no longer deny how my socialization still made me interpret some aspect of those comments as confirmation of my value. I could not comprehend how this validation I craved might also become the reason for my downfall.

Growing into a woman didn’t mean that I achieved all my girlhood dreams. Instead, it meant that I could no longer ignore how chasing those dreams would introduce me to a pain accepted and perpetuated by the culture in which I lived. As the realization sunk in, I felt it solidify while I watched my country ignore warning signs of a man who perpetuated the disrespect of women. I wanted so badly for those around me to feel just as angry when we all heard him brag about grabbing any woman anywhere.

I wished I could return to my childhood, when I believed that wooden blocks contained magic, that beauty led to happiness, that true love was a noble pursuit and not a disguise to trick me into seeking validation. But I would never again feel the magic I once did as a little girl because I knew how it could cost to be a woman. My disenchantment was complete. But it was not the end of what I learned, for I’m yearning to love myself once more.

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I know I’m beautiful,

Or so I’m told. Long before strange men called
to me on the street, strange women were stopping
Mom in the grocery store, telling her how beautiful
Her daughters were, asking where she got them like
There had been a deal on aisle three.
One of them passed and said to me,
“You’re too beautiful to not be smiling.”

It feels good, I can’t deny, knowing that when I step out
Into the world, I’ll catch someone’s eye
But I grow weary as people choose this one facet to fixate on,
For it makes me the target of leering eyes
And ruins what I thought was a fatherly relationship
Turned with a comment that curdled the contents of my stomach

We women are supposed to be beautiful,
But do you see my beauty when I starve my body
To feel my bones? Am I beautiful when I slice my skin
To soothe the ache within? Do you see my beauty or just
My features arranged to please your gaze?

For, I know I’m beautiful, me, a broken mess.
I may never stop trying to break myself in new ways,
But I know my beauty extends beyond my face.
It exists in the brilliance of my mind that ignites
With every thought. It flourishes with a kindness
Through friendship that can’t be bought.

I’m beautiful, this self that’s me.
Not because you told me what you see
But because of my many intricacies.
You may say I’m beautiful and walk away
But I know I’m beautiful because I’m wonderfully made
For though you tried to bend me to your will,
I’m beautiful because I’m still,
me.