

My Eyes Are Up Here

by Laura Zimmermann

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My Eyes Are Up Here

Prologue

My mother believes there are two types of people: those who like to be the center of attention, and those who are too shy to want anybody to notice them. She thinks I am the second but should be the first.

What she'd never understand is that some people like to be noticed for some things but not for other things. Like to be noticed for being an excellent piano player, but not for being allergic to peanuts. Or noticed for wearing new shoes, but not for speaking with an accent. Or noticed for being the only Kennedy High student to score a 5 on the AP Human Geography exam, but not for being the only Kennedy High student whose breasts are bigger than her head.

Chapter 1

“Come on, Greer. Maybe you’ll make a new friend.”

I answer in annoyed blinks.

“It’s nice to help someone get settled in a new place. It’s a chance to give back.”

I blink at her harder, because she’s pretending like I volunteered for this.

“Half an hour. Forty minutes, tops.”

Mom’s half hours do not top out at forty minutes. Mom’s half hours can last hours. Especially if she has an audience.

We’re here for her work. She is a relocation advisor with Relocation Specialists, Inc. Big companies hire her to help settle new employees in the area. She leads neighborhood tours, arranges school visits, and recommends pediatricians, handymen, or Brazilian waxers.

She’s very good at it. It satisfies her constant need to share her opinions and justifies the over-the-top luxury SUV she leases, with its interior of baby-seal leather.

Sometimes, like now, if she has a client with a kid my age, she'll drag me along to meet with them, like a junior re-lo advisor. I'm supposed to answer their questions about being a teenager in suburban Illinois. They never have any questions.

It's always the same. It's even the same Starbucks. I sit next to Mom and try to look extra welcoming. The new kid stares at their phone under the table so I know that wherever they came from, they had friends cooler than me. If the client is a mom, she'll ask me the kind of questions she thinks her sulky kid would want to ask if they weren't too sulky to ask them, and once I start to reply, my mom will interrupt with what she thinks I should answer. It's completely uncomfortable for everyone, except Mom. Kathryn Walsh is never uncomfortable.

Believe it or not, there are times being a mild-mannered, high-achieving, generally agreeable teenager does not work for me, and dealing with my mother is one of them. If I fought with her more, like Maggie fights with her mom, or if I was embarrassing, like Tyler, she wouldn't make me do these things. It would be too exhausting. But Kathryn Walsh exhausts me more than I exhaust her, so here I am. She is *just so*. I am just so not.

It is why I go with her to meet the uninterested progeny of people cruel enough/important enough to make their families move during high school.

It is why I help my brother, Tyler, with math homework he could find the answers to online.

It is why I faithfully attend the yearly reunion of the moms and babies from her childbirth class, hosted by this very coffee establishment every May.

This branch of Starbucks is located on the path of least resistance. I follow her inside.

The kid I'm supposed to meet will be a sophomore at Kennedy, like me. That's something. All I have in common with the Natural Birth and Beginnings crowd is being dragged out of the womb by the same midwife. Jackson Oates, whoever he is, is probably going to think this is as awkward as I do, so at least we'll have that in common, too.

Mom greets Mrs. Oates with a hug and they introduce me to Jackson, who does not look like a sulky weirdo. He's actually kind of non-sulky and non-weird. Light-brown hair, dark-brown eyes, and a big smile as soon as we say hello. He puts out his hand to shake mine, which makes me wonder if the place they just moved from was the 1950s. I've been taught to be polite, though, so I shake firmly. He seems pleased.

"Oh, good! Your parents must have drilled the importance of a good handshake into you, too." He says it in a dad voice, with a glance sideways at his mother, who rolls her eyes. "I always feel like I'm closing a German business deal," he adds in a normal voice. His hand is warm. Not sweaty. Just warm like a live body is supposed to be, and like I suspect the usual phone doodlers' hands are not.

"We meet a lot of new people," says his mom, as an excuse.

"Ich will buy zwanzig Apfelkuchens and ein BMW," he says to me, and against all my instincts, I am charmed.

This is not going to be the kind of awkward I thought it would be. This is a different kind of awkward.

There's a quick negotiation while Mom figures out what

everyone wants, orders for us (she is just so *just so*), and pays. Because she basically views me as her assistant, she says to everyone else, “Let’s grab that table. Greer will wait for the drinks.” Mom and Mrs. Oates head to Mom’s favorite four-topper, the one closest to the outlet. Jackson stays next to me, though, watching the barista steam the milk.

This is the part where the new goon is supposed to slide in next to their mother and act like I personally made them come here. But Jackson is standing next to me, waiting for the drinks, like we’re in this together. I must look confused. He says, “You’ve only got two hands. For four drinks?” Like an idiot, I look down at my hands, as though I’m confirming the number.

“Oh. Right. Yes.”

“Hey, thanks for coming here today. I’m sure you’ve got a lot of things you’d rather be doing.”

I thought I did, but this is actually much more interesting than clipping my toenails after all. I sputter, “It’s no problem.” We stand there in silence for a minute, and I wonder if I’m the non-conversational goon in this arrangement. I add, “You realize you’re getting a serious insider’s tour right now. This place is kind of an underground favorite with the locals.”

He half grins. “Starbucks?”

“Oh, so you’ve heard of it?”

“Kathryn? Coffee ready for Kathryn?”

We carry the drinks from the counter. I set down Mrs. Oates’s café miel and Mom’s oh-what’s-that-is-it-French-I’ll-try-that-too at the table, where they’ve spread out the Relocation Specialists Resource Binder, where Mom keeps all her pro tips about this

“uniquely welcoming and family-oriented community just forty-five minutes from downtown Chicago.” I’m pretty sure this Starbucks is in the binder (which is in the Starbucks, which might make it some kind of re-lo wormhole).

Jackson walks right past with my hot chocolate and his chai. “Those cushy chairs are open. Is that good with you?” he says over his shoulder.

Umm, yes?

I leave Mom, Mrs. Oates, and the binder at the table. Jackson and I plop ourselves in a pair of coffee-stained leather chairs next to a fireplace that’s not turned on. He looks like he meets strange girls at Starbucks every day. I try to look like I do, too.

It turns out Jackson has questions—good questions. Instead of starting with “What AP classes are there?” because that’s on the website, or “Can you letter in making memes?” because he’s not one of my brother’s seventh-grade friends, he jumps right in with “Is it the kind of school where kids come and go all the time, or where there hasn’t been a new kid since second grade?”

“I don’t know exactly how many there are each year,” I say. He is leaning over the arm of the chair toward me, like I am the keeper of an important piece of navigational advice, which I guess I am. I try to remember how many new kids I had in classes last year, and wonder if I can consider them a representative sample, and extrapolate an overall figure from that, until I realize he doesn’t want data; he is asking a different question. A real question. He wants to know what he’s walking into, and he’s asking me. It’s October, halfway through first quarter—maybe not the best time to start at a new school. By now, people

have pretty much staked out where they're going to sit and who they're going to talk to.

"Oh. You're trying to figure out if you're going to get lost or be instantly famous." He nods. "I'm not sure. I've never actually been the new kid—"

"Never?!"

"Nope. Even when we moved, we stayed in the same school."

"That's amazing."

I stop for a second, stuck on "amazing." He's not saying *I* am amazing. *Immobility* is amazing. Like bizarre mutations in nature are amazing. But for some reason, that amazing feels kind of nice coming from him. I shake it off.

"Yes," I say, "never leaving the zip code is one of my proudest accomplishments. There's not a lot of brand-new people, but there are three middle schools and only one high school, so there are tons of people I don't even know." He nods, like this is what he was hoping for. "I don't think a new kid would stand out too much. Unless they wanted to."

"What about lunch? If I don't latch on to somebody before then, am I going to have any place to sit?"

I can't imagine that Jackson is not going to find at least forty friends on his first day, because he's adorable and super friendly, but he's obviously had a lot of experience being the new kid and I haven't, so maybe I'm wrong. "It's probably safest to latch on to somebody from fourth period, unless they all seem horrible. Just in case, though, here's what you do: there's this long counter in front of the big window that looks over the track. People sit there if they have to finish homework or charge their phones. If

you want to, you can sit there by yourself without looking like a loser. Everyone will just think you're writing wistful poetry or something." What I should have said was "Don't be stupid, you'll sit with me!" but I give myself partial credit for explaining about the counter seats.

"That's perfect. My next question was going to be where I could go to write some wistful poetry."

"Oh, man. I'm sorry to tell you this but they cancelled the Wistful Poetry Club last year. Budget cuts."

"We should probably just go back to Cleveland then."

I know he's joking, but it reminds me that this is all new to him—well, Starbucks isn't new, and according to my mom, moving isn't new—but Kennedy is new, and his house is new, and all the people are going to be new. I'm new.

"What's Cleveland like?"

"It's kind of like everywhere else, I guess." He shrugs. "We were only there a couple of years." He has changed, just the tiniest bit. Still friendly. Still adorable. But the tiniest bit . . . sad, maybe. "My little sister didn't want to move. Like reeeally didn't want to move."

"She liked Cleveland?"

"Not especially. But she hates to move."

"How about you?"

"I'm used to it," he shrugs. "And there are Starbucks everywhere."

"What?! NO! But at least this is the original one, right?" And we are back to where we were. I thought I spied a tiny of sliver of something less than perfectly confident, but then it vanished. It

makes me curious about him. More curious. I wish we were somewhere different. I wish I was showing him something he hadn't seen a million times before.

We pull up our schedules to compare. We've got a lot of the same classes, but none at the same time. Plus he's in German and I'm in Spanish, and he's one year accelerated in math, but I'm two. I tip my face into my mug so he can't see that I look disappointed.

"You must be pretty good at math," he says.

Mid-sip, I snort. Not because I'm some kind of math god. I'm as good as you can be without being one of those kids who have to take college math because they're too smart for high school math. Last year Mom offered me up as a math tutor to one of her clients when she heard they had a middle schooler who loved math but "needed to be pushed." She'd have loved to list me in the binder under Academic Resources—or at least as a babysitter or something that got me out of the house. The kid turned out to be some kind of genius, though, who took the train to the University of Chicago twice a week to study ergodic theory. I don't even know what that is. I'm just the top of the regular smart kids.

Being good at math—really, at any academics—is pretty much my entire identity. It's funny to talk to someone who doesn't know that.

At school, what people know about me is that I get good grades; I'm Maggie Cleave's quieter, more agreeable friend; and that I wear clothes that are three times too big for a full-grown bear. That's it. I don't play a sport, I'm not in theater, I don't get in trouble, I'm not a girl you'd ever think about going out with. I'm just Smart Girl. Smart Girl who keeps her arms crossed in front of her chest all the time.

But Jackson doesn't know that. All he knows is that my mom tried to order skim milk in my hot chocolate. To Jackson, I could be all kinds of other things, too. Smart Girl *plus*. To the new kid, I'm also new. It's kind of fun to think about for now, even though I know he'll figure it out once he's at school.

"You're not in *any* of my classes? That's weird because as a certified relocation advisor I thought you were going to introduce me at the beginning of each period on Monday. Nicht gut . . .," he adds in his German businessman voice.

He's sitting in a lumpy, scuffed chair that a million customers have sat in before, but he looks like it's shaped exactly for him, like however they stretched or slouched or fell asleep, it was all in order to make this chair fit him perfectly. One knee is half up the armrest, his head is propped against his hand, he looks like every muscle in his body is completely relaxed. Like he belongs there. Like he belongs wherever he goes.

He is smart and funny and just kind of comfortable, which I almost never am. I was wrong when I thought what we'd have in common was thinking this was awkward. That part is just me.

And somehow, this makes me start to unfold. I've had my feet on the chair, knees pulled up tight into to my chest, both hands around my mug. Now I unwrap one leg and then the other and drape them over the armrest. I lean back, just a little, adjusting my sweatshirt so it's still baggy over my body. I hear myself say, "You'll be fine. But your German room is in the same hallway as my math class, first period, so if you start to panic, yell for me. Greer! I'm lost!" His cheeks spread out with a big, real smile. "Greer! Helpen mich por favor!" I'm loud enough

that Mom looks over, curious. Not annoyed; surprised. Jackson laughs out loud. “Say it in English, though,” I add. “My German is *gesundheit*.”



When it’s time to leave, Mom says, “Oh, Jackson! Why don’t you take Greer’s number? You know, in case you have any more questions about school?” I hate and love her for this.

Mom starts to rattle off my number, and I wonder if Jackson is only pretending to type.

But before she finishes, he stops and hands me his phone. “Do you mind doing it?” and there I am, already added as a new contact: Greer Walsh. He spelled Greer right. No one has ever spelled ~~Grier~~ ~~Garear~~ Gruyere right the first time in my life.

I retype the number twice to make sure it’s right, even though I figure a butt dial is the only way he’s ever going to use it. I hand it back, he taps a couple of keys, and there is the sweetest little *ping!* in my bag. “Now you’ve got mine, too.” He smiles, and I blush hard in every part of my body. I’m glad he can only see my cheeks turn pink.

On the way out, Mom says, “You should have brought along your daughter, too!”

The whole mood changes. Jackson and his mother look at each other like Mom has just said there would be anchovy and liver subs in the welcome basket.

“We did,” starts Mrs. Oates. “She, ah, decided she’d rather stay in the car with the iPad.” She looks embarrassed, and Mom cringes in sympathy. “She gets a little nervous around new people.”

It's hard, even for my mom, to know what to say to that, knowing that they keep moving the kid around anyway. I don't remember anybody being particularly compassionate as a third grader, so good luck at school on Monday, Oates Girl.

"Actually, it works out perfectly," Jackson finally says. "We like to save Quinlan for after people have already decided to like us. I mean, if they decide to like us." He gives me a shrug and a goofy look.

"*Of course* we like you," says Mom through a little waterfall of a laugh, her eyes on me the whole time.

And we do. We really, really do.

Chapter 2

Before the garage door closes on Mom's Land Rover, I'm on my way to my room to do what I always do when I get home: lock my door, take off my shirt and bra, and lie flat on my back on my bed. I've got this old blanket, the kind with satiny trim that's always slippery and cool even when the rest of the blanket is warm. I position myself so that the trim goes just along the indent where the back of my bra was and roll back and forth against it a few times. It's like putting a cold cloth on a hot forehead. I spread out and feel everything I've held tight let go, my spine unfurling into the shape it's supposed to be. Five or six minutes, that's all. Five or six minutes to give my shoulders a break, to give my neck a break, to give myself a break. To breathe.

Usually, I can almost turn off the outside. I don't hear my dad streaming Wilco in the kitchen or my mom asking him for the thousandth time if that's who they saw at Grant Park that time. I don't think about what's due in AP History, or if Tyler is the reason my toothbrush was already wet this morning, or about Maggie calling the vegan club hypocrites because their

cats kill birds. I try to not think about anything at all, but just feel like this.

But today, lying here half naked feels different. Because I'm still thinking about Jackson. I feel . . . open. Exposed. Poised. Not like I've unwound; like I'm even more wound up. In a good way. Like maybe I'd rather be in my body than out of it for once.

My breasts slide out to each side, and I can see between them down to my belly button and to the top of my jeans, and all the way down to my feet. There is a whole body here that is not boobs. I forget that sometimes. I arch my back. I lift my legs and flop them down over the edges of my bed. I run a hand over my belly and it's smooth and soft and cool. And then I imagine it's someone else's hand touching that same skin.

And I stop.

This is stupid. It's stupid because I don't even know him. And he doesn't know me. He is nice because he's new and if you are new and not nice, you're going to have a very rough year. And even if he turned out to have some weird quirk or disease that means he likes awkward girls who don't know how to dress, it's stupid because you can only touch someone's stomach for so long before you move your hand up and eureka! you've discovered the mountains. And not the lovely ski peaks they have in the Rockies. You're lost in the Himalayas, which are inhospitable to life and give you altitude sickness. Which are lumpy and painful and sweaty. Okay, that's not the Himalayas, that part is just me. But still, no one vacations at Everest. They scale it, snap a photo, and try to get the hell out alive with a good story to post.

I roll off the bed and dig my clean bra out of the drawer. The

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other one's too sweaty. I pull on a supersize tee and the rest of me disappears under it, too.

You know who gets to touch my stomach all they want? My breasts. They can hardly help themselves.

Chapter 3

Maggie is outraged. As usual.

We were supposed to turn in one page on a poem about dying and not wanting to. It's more complicated than that, but it's basically summed up in the famous lines about raging against the dying of the light.

Maggie turned in five pages about how terminally ill people should have the right to doctor-assisted suicide.

"Maggie, this is AP Lit. The assignment was to analyze the poem, not argue with it."

"How am I supposed to analyze it when I disagree with it?"

"How do you disagree with a poem?!"

The rest of the class has already left, so it's just Maggie, Ms. Mulder, and me. I spend half of my time with Maggie listening to her argue with a teacher. Or a student. Or a parent. Or an eight-year-old trick-or-treater who says Hermione isn't as cool as Harry and Ron because she doesn't play Quidditch.

This is why I didn't tell her about meeting Jackson this

weekend, even though now he's here somewhere in the building—because she is too busy arguing with people. Or maybe it's because she will want me to ask him out, and I will say, “No, I prefer to bury my feelings deep inside this giant sweatshirt so I won't be embarrassed when he rejects me for a regular-shaped girl,” and then it will be me that Maggie is arguing with. As a general rule, I avoid arguing with Maggie.

“So if you assigned a poem promoting torture, I should just dissect the rhyme scheme and talk about the descriptive language? You're saying I should not stand up against torture?”

“I didn't assign a poem about torture. I assigned a classic Dylan Thomas poem about a universal human experience.”

Maggie is looking at Ms. Mulder like she's asked us to dig a mass grave and fill it with teacup puppies. Ms. Mulder is looking at an insulated lunch bag on her desk. She's never going to get to that sandwich if she doesn't give up.

“All right. You didn't do all the analyses I asked for, but your writing was quite good, and clearly you thought a lot about the poem. I'll give you a B plus, but the next one had better be perfect. Ask Greer if you need help.”

This is why I don't want to talk to Maggie. Maggie makes people do what they don't want to do. Like change a C minus to a B plus or admit they have a huge crush on their mom's client's son.

“That seems like a good compromise,” I say before Maggie can say anything else. I slip my finger through one of the loose loops in her scarf and tug. I can't argue with her, but I can unravel her knitting if she doesn't get moving. “See you tomorrow,” I say to Ms. Mulder as I lead us out.

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“Do not go gentle to fourth period!” Maggie says, once we are in the hallway. “Rage, rage against—”

“Everything?”

“At least something, Greer. You’ve got to rage against *something*.”

Chapter 4

What would I rage against if I was a raging sort of person? Maude and Mavis.

And who are Maude and Mavis? They are my breasts.

My boobs.

Jugs.

Knockers.

Mammos.

Hooters.

Melons.

Rack.

Simon & Garfunkel.

Lovely lady lumps.

Ta-tas.

Remember what I said about me and math? If breasts were math, I wouldn't just be ahead of all the kids in my grade, I'd be one of those freakishly gifted kids who had to bring her breasts to college because they were too big for high school. They'd give me a year's worth of AP credits just for putting on a tank top.

They are not going to set any world records, but to put it in simple math terms, they are significantly larger than the mean, the median, and the mode.

Not everybody realizes this immediately, because I've been wearing size XXL shirts since ninth grade. *Men's* XXL shirts. Even XXL ladies aren't supposed to have honkers like these.

If I tried to put on the kind of shirt my friends wear, the fabric would burst Hulk-style.

My mom thinks that wearing baggy clothes makes me look fat. Not fat. "Heavy." That's Mom's word for fat. (She would never say "fat," though I'm sure she has an idea of what the optimal ratio of pounds to inches should be.)

She has average-size breasts. C cups, probably. I must have inherited these things from some chesty old lady on my dad's side.

Here's what my friends say about them:

That's right. Nothing. We don't talk about them. Not my mom. Not even Maggie. Maggie knows I'm not thrilled, but if I told her how I really felt, she'd be disappointed in me. She'd either try to get me to show up to first period in a bustier to deliver a lecture to certain individuals about harassment or decide there's no time like age almost-sixteen for permanent body-altering reduction surgery and start interviewing plastic surgeons about how much breast tissue to chop off. I'm not ready to do either of those things right now. I would just like to finish high school.

I'm not the only person who doesn't want to talk about their

body. I mean, little things, sure. Someone tall might say, “I can’t find any pants long enough,” or each of us might point out our own zit. But when something gets worse or weird or whatever, we don’t talk about it anymore.

An example. During Eating Disorders Awareness Week every February, a nurse from the district comes to an assembly to tell us to be on alert for eating disorders. She makes it sound like it will be easy to spot them. Like kids are standing in the lunchroom saying, “I am only going to eat eraser dust from now on. And if that becomes too much temptation, I will start using those stubby pencils from Ikea that don’t have any erasers at all.” And then we will form a trust circle around her and she’ll eat a sandwich.

But it’s not like that. Most people keep their stuff to themselves.

We had a swimming unit in gym during the fall of freshman year. I was already feeling self-conscious about my shape, but at least they separate boys and girls for anything that involves sex education, swimsuits, or sleeping bags (like the service learning retreat at Camp Hide-Yer-Weed). They made us wear these old Kennedy team suits from 1975, because some of the girls only own triangle bikinis, which do not stay up well when you’re trying to learn the fly. The Kennedy suit is a maroon one-piecer cut so high around the neck it’s practically a turtleneck and so stretched out that the crotch hangs to your knees. I could still squeeze myself into a 36 then, as long as I didn’t try to breathe too deeply.

We got ready, ran through the shower, and lined up against the wall freezing our butts off while Ms. Reinhold lectured us about water safety.

I was trying not to stare at Nella Woster, but it was hard to figure out how she put on the same ugly, old suit as the rest of us and made it look like she was an extra in a rum commercial. Every curve was perfect. It must be hell to shop with her. I bet she has a hard time ruling anything out because it all looks good. “I guess I’ll have to take everything.” “You can have it all for free if you’ll just Instagram yourself in our brand.”

It was about at this point that Jessa Timms, super jock and possible bodybuilder, started to walk past me, stopped, looked at my chest, and said, “Whoa, Greer! You’re built, girl! I thought you were just a little big.”

My face turned the same color as the swimsuit. I was slouching so much I was practically bent in two. No one laughed, just kind of gasped, like they couldn’t believe Jessa would say that. *We have rules, Jessa! We don’t say things about people’s bodies in front of them.* But for the rest of the hour, I noticed girls checking me out, confirming. *Yeah, she’s right. Greer Walsh is stacked.* Even though honestly, I was nowhere near the size I am now.

That one day on the pool deck freshman year is as much of a discussion as I’ve ever had about them. But I bet other people talk about them a lot.

Chapter 5

There's this questionnaire online called "Is breast reduction surgery right for your teen?" Half the questions are about "your teen's" pain, growth, genetics, scarring, "onset of menarche and regularity of menstruation," "motivation and psychological readiness," "emotional maturity," and a bunch of other stuff that's none of anybody's business. There's a list of things you're supposed to ask your doctor, too, and even though I'd rather not ask her any of them, I know I have to get over it if I want to know more about the surgery. So when we went for physicals just before school started, I decided that when she said, "Greer, would you like your mother to step out of the room while we do the exam?" I was going to say yes.

I hadn't talked to anybody about my breasts or how I felt about them, and it wasn't like Dr. Garcia would be easy to talk to, but at least I knew she'd have to keep our conversation secret. She'd probably had patients say a lot weirder things to her. I planned to be super professional about it, so she'd know I had the "emotional maturity" you were supposed to have if you were fifteen and walking around with boobs the size of baby manatees. (Apparently if

you want any kind of plastic surgery after you are an adult, you don't have to be "emotionally mature" at all. You just have to pay for it.) As soon as my mother left, I was going to say, "I was doing some research about surgical options for breast reduction and I am interested in exploring this for myself." She was going to pull up a chair, answer my questions, and neither of us was going to blush or stutter at all. Maybe she'd even give me a pamphlet titled *Secret, Free, One-Hour Breast Surgeries You Can Have Done During Your Study Period*.

I was sitting there, trying to get that paper they cover the table with to absorb some of the sweat from my palms, when Dr. Garcia pulled out her stethoscope. I almost thought she was going to forget to ask, and then I'd have to ask Mom to leave. But then at the last minute she said, "Greer, would you like your mother to step out of the room while we do the exam?" My heart raced. I was going to have this conversation with a real person, instead of just reading WebMD and watching a couple of YouBoobers describe their experiences. I was half dying to and half dying not to.

Only I must have forgotten who my mother was, because before I answered, she said, "Oh, that's right! I forgot you ask that. Greer, do you have anything private you want to talk to the doctor about this time?" She looked up at me like she was modern and supportive and respected my privacy, but didn't move to put her phone back in her purse or grab her jacket. She said it like she already knew the answer, and the answer was, of course, "Of course not." Dr. Garcia kept looking at me, though, and all that went through my head was that this was why people who are supposed to be on birth control don't end up on birth control: because you'd

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basically have to say it in front of your mother to get your mother to leave anyway. I shook my head. And really, once you think about it, if I'm too self-conscious to tell my mother to get the hell out so I can ask the doctor if I've stopped growing enough to have my boobs lopped off, how would I get through the next sixteen rounds of questions with nurses, surgeons, insurance providers, hospital staff, my dad, and for the love of god TYLER?

Mom stayed put. I stayed quiet. Dr. Garcia said my heart and lungs sounded healthy, I should remember sunscreen, and I had gained four pounds in the last year. (At least three of them were probably breast tissue.) And then she printed out a copy of the form you need from the clinic if you're going to play a sport. Yeah, right.

Chapter 6

“My client is stopping over here. Get your stuff off the table.”

Tyler scans the dining room table, which is holding one Scandinavian wood platter, and approximately 450 cubic feet of Tyler’s electronics, homework, books, paper footballs, wrappers, socks, and half-empty water bottles. He moves on to the kitchen.

He opens the fridge and pulls out another water bottle, then stands looking inside like he’s waiting for a package to appear in the crisper drawer. I’m sitting at the kitchen island watching this whole scene, reminding myself that this is not my responsibility. Tyler being an idiot is Mom’s problem, not mine. I tried to tell her that when they brought him home from the hospital thirteen years ago. But I can’t stand it.

“Mom said to pick up your stuff.”

Tyler glances back over his shoulder at the table.

“It’s not all mine.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

I push back my stool and walk to the table. Tyler wanders over to stand next to me.

“What part’s not yours?”

He eyes the spread critically. “Well, that’s not mine.”

Yes. Agreed. The Kjerstønagsrud turned wood platter that Mom bought for 175 dollars at a museum gift shop is not Tyler’s.

“I think that’s yours,” he tries, waving toward the table with one hand while scrolling through his friends’ stories with the other.

“This is mine?” I can’t even stand the thought of touching it. I just let my finger hover an inch above it.

“Isn’t it?” He’s still looking at his phone.

“You honestly think this is mine?”

“Um, I thought so?”

“Tyler, this is a nut cup. A plastic shield that slips into a pair of compression shorts to protect a player’s testicles.”

He looks up, finally, and crinkles his nose. “Oh yeah. I guess.”

“And you still think it’s mine? Seeing how I don’t wear a cup because I don’t have testicles that need protecting? And seeing how even if I did, I don’t play any sports anyway? And seeing how I’m not a vile slob who would leave a sweaty plastic thing that’s been inside my underwear on the table where people eat?”

My voice gets higher and sharper, and both Tyler and I can hear how much I sound like Mom.

“Or maybe you think I should wear a nut cup when I’m doing homework in case my calc book drops into my lap and crushes my imaginary nads. It’s a very heavy book. I’m sure it could do some damage. Are you offering this thing to me? Because that’s very sweet of you, Tyler.”

And then Jackson Oates is standing in the archway to the dining room, waving awkwardly, greeting me with two syllables, “Hey-ay,” to acknowledge that this is a weird, weird conversation to be walking in on. Great. He’s going to think Ty and I hang out comparing our testicles all day. That’s just the impression I want to give.

“Oh! Hi! My mom said your mom was stopping by—I didn’t know you’d be with her.”

“We’re picking up my dad at the airport. Sorry to barge in.” Jackson pushes both hands deep into his pockets in a way that makes his shoulders spread out a little wider, and I wonder if he might be a swimmer or a baseball player or something.

“It’s okay. Tyler and I were just deciding where to keep his cup: the middle of the dining room table or right in the refrigerator?”

Tyler bumps me with his elbow. He is not embarrassed to leave his personal penis protector out in the middle of the room, but he does not want me making fun of him in front of other kids. At least he has some sense of decency.

“Maybe you could find a crystal vase?” Jackson pronounces it *vahz*, with a flourish.

“How would that even work?” asks Tyler. He’s so literal.

“Jackson, this is my brother, Tyler. Ty, this is Jackson Oates.” I hope when I say Jackson Oates it isn’t obvious that I’ve been repeating the phrase Jackson Oates a hundred times a day since I met him.

“You play lacrosse?” Jackson asks, nodding to a neon-pink ball. Jeez, Tyler, it’s not even the right *season* to leave a lacrosse ball on the table.

Sulky Tyler brightens up under the attention. “Yeah—do you?”

Jackson shakes his head. “When we lived in Virginia, I wanted to but we moved before the season started. I’ve played a lot of other things, baseball, soccer, swim team once, but the last couple of years I’ve mostly played tennis. Kind of depends on where we live. How ’bout you, Greer? What do you play?”

I brighten up under the attention, too. “Oh. I don’t play anything.”

I don’t explain that sports, unlike academics, require that your body cooperate with you, instead of bulging and jiggling and getting in the way. Just last night, Tyler stole my phone and I had to run after him with no bra on under my pajamas, and Mavis bounced up and almost gave me a black eye.

“How’d the first couple of days go?” I’d spotted him a few times, first being led around by one of the deans, then by a couple of well-meaning student council members. By lunch today he was in the middle of a pack of guys who walk down to the taco trucks every day. I’m not surprised he found friends so quickly, but I’m a little disappointed he isn’t going to need me to shepherd him through our adolescence.

“Pretty good. I haven’t gotten lost. I haven’t been beaten up. Nobody stole my lunch money.”

“Good thing. The taco trucks don’t take the student meal cards.” He cocks his head and I blush. I don’t want him to know I’ve been tracking him. “I saw you leaving with Max and those guys. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t stuck at the wistful poetry counter.”

“You should have come with us. The barbacoa was awesome.”

I try to picture the tear in the universe that would happen if I invited myself to the taco trucks with Maggie’s brother and the other upperclassmen who have adopted Jackson. “I had some poems to finish up,” I say as wistfully as I can.

“Nah-uh. Max said you always sit with his sister.”

Jackson talked to Max about me? Now I cock my head, but he doesn’t blush. He just smiles. I mean, it was probably “I hope that weirdo with the giant boobs doesn’t follow me to the taco trucks, because she’s been stalking me all day,” “Don’t worry, she always sits with my sister, and they never leave school property because Maggie is too lazy to walk anywhere,” but at least he was thinking about me.

“Well, if Max or anybody else tries to steal your lunch money, you know where to find me. First period, room one-thirteen,” I manage.

There’s a sick thump as a blond elf whacks Jackson in the back. He reaches around and grabs her arm before she does it again.

“OWWW!” she growls.

“Knock it off, Q.”

“I. Didn’t. Do. Anything.” My mom told me she was in third grade, but she’s tall for her age and wire thin. She could almost pass for a middle schooler if it weren’t for her outfit: pink Uggs—in Kathryn Walsh’s house! on Kathryn Walsh’s carpet!—and too-short leggings with a T-shirt that says **YOU DON’T LIKE MY ATTITUDE? I DON’T LIKE YOUR FACE!** in sparkly balloon letters. She jerks her arm out of Jackson’s grasp and glares at him.

Jackson doesn't bother to introduce us to Quinlan. "Where's Mom?"

"Being boring."

"We're being boring, too. Go find Mom."

Tyler and I don't like each other; he's disgusting and I'm not. But it's not like we hate each other. Not usually, anyway. I get mad when he leaves things that have touched his nads on the table, and he thinks I shouldn't mention the constipation medicine he sometimes takes in front of his friends, but we can usually tolerate each other.

The tension between Jackson and Quinlan is different. Jackson's usually kind of loose and lanky, like if you happened to bump into him, he'd sway a tiny bit one way then another, then wrap those long arms around you to make sure you didn't fall. Once Quinlan showed up and belted him, it was like he turned to an iron beam. Braced. Tense.

"Did everybody meet everybody?" asks Mom, floating into the room. What she means is, "Greer Eleanor Walsh, I raised you to be a good hostess, even to violent elf girls, and I expect that you will have offered refreshments to the Oates children." Her eyes glide to the contraband on the dining table and she flinches.

"You'll have to excuse the mess." She sighs to Mrs. Oates. "Boys!"

Mrs. Oates, tall and fair like Quinlan but perfectly tailored and comfortable like Jackson, smiles sympathetically, though I bet Jackson files his old homework assignments in folders like I do and puts his sports gear in labeled cubbies as soon as he's done with it.

“Does anybody want something to drink? We have homemade sodas—raspberry or blueberry vanilla, I think,” I offer, too late.

“We’re out of blueberry,” says Tyler, and burps. Ever since we got the SodaStream, he is full of carbon dioxide bubbles all the time. Mom gives him an I-could-kill-you-with-my-bare-hands look, which is how we all feel about Ty much of the time.

“We have to get going,” Mrs. Oates says. “We’re picking up Ben. He’s been in Dubai for two weeks.”

“We’re not actually picking him up in Dubai,” says Jackson, but I am too distracted to be amused. Quinlan is standing in front of a bookcase with her back to us. She’s doing something on the shelf, but I can’t see what.

“I hope not!” roars Mom, as though it’s the funniest idea ever, rather than just a throwaway line. She glances over at me, presumably to see if I’ve noticed that Jackson is charming.

The Oateses leave, Mom starts in on Tyler about cleaning up his stuff (sounding an awful lot like me), and I head straight for the bookcase.

In front of the books, there sits a row of little glass Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs figurines, Mom’s from when she was a girl. They are handblown and very fragile. She gave them to me when I was seven or eight, but I could only play with them at the table, with a flour-sack towel spread underneath, not mixed in with any other toys or Legos, and none of the pieces were allowed to touch each other. So not really play with them so much as move them from the shelf to the table and look at them. Preferably without breathing.

I loved them. I still do. I love that they are tiny and predictable

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and perfect. This one is always falling asleep. That one is too shy to speak. The fellow on the end is pissed at everything all the time. Life would be less complicated if everything about you could be summed up so easily. If all you ever had to be was Sleepy or Grumpy or Happy. But even Tyler's not Dopey all the time. Sometimes he's Stinky.

My stomach turns. There is Snow White, two bunnies, a nest of tiny bluebirds, and six dwarfs.

Grumpy is gone.

Chapter 7

“Uh, hi, Jackson. It was really great to see you and meet your wonderful sister. By the way, I’m pretty sure the darling cherub stole a tiny glass Disney dwarf that is important to me for very mature and rational reasons and I was wondering if I could get him back? Siblings, am I right?”

Yeah. That’ll totally work. He’ll probably say, “I was wondering where this little guy came from!” and pull out a box with Grumpy safely swaddled in dodo down. “I went ahead and polished up his hat and fixed the chip at the tip of his pickaxe, too. I hope that’s all right.” And then he’ll tell me that he’s always wanted to go out with someone who wears bigger T-shirts than he does.

“You didn’t tell me you know the new kid.” I jump as Maggie bangs her lunch tray on the table.

“You mean Jackson?” I say it like there are tons of new kids she might be referring to, not like I’ve just been watching him across the cafeteria, making his way out with Max Cleave and another senior.

“He told my brother you were the first person he met here. He said you were really helpful.”

“Helpful? I’m not sure I was helpful. My mom made me come with her to meet them. You know how she does that. It’s so annoying.” False. Meeting Jackson was the least annoying thing she has ever asked me to do. “Why’s Max hanging out with a sophomore?”

“Max wants him to play baseball next spring. They need a new second-base inner-fielder or whatever because what’s-his-butt graduated and Max doesn’t think the kid with the furry beard is any good.”

“I think he mostly plays tennis.”

Maggie shrugs. All sports are the same to her. Once I said I was going to Tyler’s hockey game and she said, “In the winter?”

“What’s he like?”

“Jackson?”

“No. Max,” she says sarcastically.

“Oh, right. He’s nice.”

Maggie frowns at me. “‘Nice?’”

“I mean he’s friendly. And funny.” She keeps looking at me. “I don’t know. Obviously better at making friends than I am?” She is still looking at me. “I can introduce you to him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you met him?”

“I thought I mentioned it to you.”

She looks skeptical but lets it go. “Maybe you did and I forgot.”

I breathe a sigh of successful avoidance.

Then she adds, “Don’t you think he’s kind of cute? The new kid?”

“Oh. I never really thought about it,” I say. Now she sighs, because she thinks I never think about it.

It’s not that I don’t think about it. It’s that I think about it and then I think of all the reasons not to think about it.

Chapter 8

When we were in middle school, Maggie and I kept toothbrushes at each other's houses. It was the only thing we couldn't share if we decided at the last minute to sleep over. Maggie would have gone without brushing or just finger brushed, but the routine was too firmly etched in me to skip it, even for a day. Mine at her house said "GEW" in permanent marker. Hers at my house had a yellow mini hair band wrapped around the handle to identify it, in case the bite marks on the end weren't enough.

Everything else, though, we could share: pajamas, pillows, face soap, phone chargers, stuffed creatures, plantar wart treatments, hairbrushes, and clothes. Now the idea of trading tops *or* bottoms with Maggie is ridiculous. Besides the monumental size difference of our upper bodies, I am three and a half inches taller than Mags, and three and a quarter of that is just legs. It doesn't seem like that big a difference because I am always slouching and she is always standing up tall like she's trying to see over someone's head at a gun control rally.

The last time I wore anything of Maggie's besides a headband

was the first weekend after school started in ninth grade. Maude and Mavis had moved in but hadn't become the hoarding slobs they are now. I went to Maggie's after school on Friday, which rolled into Saturday which rolled into Sunday. It seemed too much to wear my Friday clothes all the way into Sunday brunch, so I borrowed a tank and a jean jacket when her mom sent us out for bagels. I was still wearing one of the bras I'd gotten when Mom took me shopping that summer (the last time we ever shopped lingerie together), a pale blue eyelet balconette, cute, not sexy, which in retrospect should have already been dumped in the giveaway pile. I was either too naïve to realize that the thing didn't fit anymore, or too embarrassed to admit it, or both.

Maggie was already off gluten, so I was in charge of choosing a bagel assortment for the Cleave family while she went to the coffee shop next door for drinks, and Max waited with the car running. It would be a lot of pressure even if her family didn't have strong opinions about everything.

"You look like a woman in need of a bagel." The guy behind the counter was probably a year or two older than us, with a mass of thick curls held back by his bagel-shop visor. If this bagel-shop thing didn't work out, he could probably be an Abercrombie model. He gave me a hungry-looking half smile.

"I *am* in need of a bagel. I need a dozen bagels, actually." I returned his half smile with a whole one.

"A dozen comes with thirteen. Most people think it's gonna be twelve, but here it's thirteen. You get a bonus bagel."

Now I would probably say, "It's called a 'baker's dozen' and it's not that special. Everybody does it. *Fourteen* bagels would be a

bonus.” But his cheekbones were so chiselly and his arms looked like they’d been kneading a lot of heavy bagel dough, and I was still hopeful about boys and breasts and bagels. “I love bonus bagels!” I chirped.

I asked for two each of the classics: plain, poppy, egg, sesame, everything. But for the others, would Maggie’s mom like flax and apple? Pepper parmesan? Was her brother a cinnamon raisin guy?

“Do you have someone to share all these bagels with?” He puppy-dogged his eyes at me. I ate it up.

I leaned over the counter guessing what kind of bagel eaters the Cleaves were, and liking that this guy was flirting with me, even if his lines were terrible. Pepper parm, cinnamon raisin, this jacket must look good on me. Another sesame, can’t go wrong with plain, my hair really does look better when I haven’t washed it. Whole wheat’s boring, try something new, I wonder where he goes to school. I couldn’t decide, except to decide to keep not deciding.

Parents and teachers always loved me. I got along with most girls, unless they hated Maggie enough to be mad at me, too. But boys, especially older ones, had never noticed me. Or at least they never seemed to notice I was a girl. But maybe that was changing. Or maybe it was just this kid in the bagel shop who liked how I was independently deciding the breakfast fates of up to thirteen people. Bialy, honey oat, salt, maybe he’s here every Sunday.

At some point, I noticed that while I was peering over the counter at the wire bins of bagels, the hot guy with the plastic serving gloves was staring straight down my shirt, still wearing that same half smile. I followed his look down to my chest to see

that not only were the tops of my breasts popping over the tank like a couple of freshly baked bagels, they were spilling out of the bra enough that there was a slice of deep pink areola visible on each side. I wasn't charming and adorable. I was nip-slipping the bagelmeister.

"The rest plain," I said, pulling the jean jacket closed. That's when I discovered that it didn't really close all the way, something Bagel Boy probably realized before I did.

"You sure? Those honey-oat ones are—"

"Yeah. Just plain. And a tub of cream cheese."

"Okeeee," he said. And packed up everything with no more flirty smiles.

I put my own dirty Friday shirt on as soon as we got back to Maggie's.

This doesn't happen anymore because I don't let it happen anymore. I shut down the flirting before it starts, with a big gray sweatshirt and no tolerance for overly friendly conversation. I shut it down before it peers down at Maude and Mavis and either gets stupidly excited or morbidly curious. Before I have to wonder whether it's me or them.

Or I did, anyway, until Jackson showed up in the re-lo binder's number one Starbucks and I let myself wonder.

Chapter 9

We are doing a unit on volleyball in gym.

Volleyball includes a lot of jumping.

I avoid unnecessary jumping.

Most girls do a quick change in the locker room—pulling off sweaters, pulling on T-shirts right over their adorable little bras. It's just gym. I, on the other hand, head to a bathroom stall, take my last deep breath for the hour, and wrestle a black overhead sports bra, at least a size too small, directly over my regular bra. I need all the support I can get. The sports bra squeezes and compresses everything into a single mound—kind of a unibreast. Or a superboob. I pull on my dad's old 2008 Run for the Zoo 5K shirt. He has a good collection of race-day shirts going back years. When I was smaller I used them as sleep shirts because they were worn in and soft and made from that breathable athletic fabric, but this is the only one that fits now. That year when Dad checked in late, there were only XXLs left. Now I wear it pretty much every time I know the Illinois Department of Education's obsession with daily phys ed is going to make me sweat.

Leaving the stall, I stand in front of the mirror. The shirt drapes over the squeezed-in superboob, my shoulders curve forward and in, and my arms cross low. I pull at the shirt, wishing it could just float out a half inch around me on all sides instead of obeying whatever laws of physics or apparel tell it to cling to me. I look like a big shapeless blob, with stick legs poking out below. I look like a giant, featherless chicken.

Which I am, clearly.

“Walsh! Let’s go!” says Ms. Reinhold, breezing through the locker room, not even looking at my chicken body. I slump out to the gym, hearing her rounding up stragglers behind me. “Woster, noooo. Jeggings are not gym clothes. You can wear school sweats.”

A minute later, Nella Woster and Ms. Reinhold appear in the gym, Nella in a pair of saggy maroon sweats cinched tight around her waist. “Nice sweats, Nella!” yells Griffin Townsend. Nella sticks out her tongue at him and catwalks to the warm-up stretches.

She’s not showing off; she can’t help having exactly the body that whoever decides what’s perfect decided is perfect. She could show up in a clown wig and look hot. I could show up in a clown wig and it still wouldn’t be the funniest-looking part of me.

We are divided into two lines to learn the underhand serve. Except for Jessa Timms, who plays on the volleyball team, most people’s balls go wide, fall short, or fly high, coming down on the other side of the net like a gently falling leaf, which would give the other team time to sit down with a notebook, track the trajectory, discuss who was going to return it, take a bathroom break, and then smash the hell out of it.

My serves coast just over the net, one after another. Ms. Reinhold nods her approval.

“Let’s try some overhand.”

Again, a handful of kids make it, most do not. After a couple of tries, I understand where the toss has to be in order to meet my hand at the right point. Most people are throwing too high or too close. Even though I haven’t played, the weight and the pressure and the curve of the ball feel right. I’m able to get most of them over the net. Jessa Timms drills every ball like a machine gun, jumping to meet the ball in the air.

Ms. R is watching me closely, and I shift a little uncomfortably. I know she’s the volleyball coach, and I know that since the volleyball season changed to winter, not as many girls go out for it. A part of me wants to mess it up, so she stops thinking I’m good, because I don’t want to have to explain why I’m not interested in playing any sports.

But another part of me keeps hitting them over the net, swinging my arm harder and harder, because it feels good to be good at something besides math.

“Why don’t we try a little real-world practice, gang,” she says. She puts half the kids on one side of the net, half on the other, and shows them how to rotate players through. “Just see how long you can keep the volley going.” I line up with my class but she says, “Not you, Walsh. Timms, come over here, too.”

She pulls us to a corner of the gym. Behind us there are slaps and cries of pain and roars of laughter as people hit the ball with no understanding of technique. Someone shouts “Fuck!” and Ms. Reinhold yells back, “You should not be passing with an open palm. And watch the effenheimers!”

“You ever play?” she asks me.

I shake my head.

“I want you to see where the real power in a serve comes from.” She tosses Jessa the ball and says, “Show her the run-up, but don’t actually hit it.”

Jessa tosses the ball up and kind of launches herself at it. I cringe like she’s going to spike it down on my face, but she just catches it and grins.

Ms. R has her show me a couple more times, then we both try it. The first time I make the leap, the unibreast heaves up and down, feeling like it’s doubling the pull of gravity. The sports bra has pulled halfway up and stopped, so there is essentially a tight horizontal band of elastic bisecting my chest in the middle. I tug it back into place and steal a look at the class, but everyone else is playing or grabbing at Nella’s sweats.

Coach Reinhold and Jessa Timms are watching my feet, asking me to jump again and again while they correct the steps. I’m pretty sweaty, and between every jump I have to readjust my bra. There’s a pain in the sides of my breasts every time I hit the ground, and the bra is pulling on my shoulders like if you stuffed a backpack with bricks and wore it backward, but I can feel I’m getting it. They decide I’m ready to try an actual serve.

My first try with the ball, I miss it altogether.

The next, it jams my folded pinky and careens directly to the right.

The third, it rockets from my hand and smacks into the ground with enough force to crater the gym floor. (Okay, no, but hard.) The only way it would have made it over a net would be if

the net was a foot high and right in front of me, but the sound of that smack gives me a tingling rush anyway.

Reinhold laughs. “Now you get it? It’s not about your arm. Power comes from your whole body.” I pull both sides of my bra back into place as Reinhold shouts to the class, “That’s it—locker rooms.” The others leave the balls rolling around the court and file down to change.

“That was pretty cool, right?” Jessa offers me a fist bump before she heads toward the locker room.

“Walsh,” Ms. R calls. I turn to her brightly. I assume she is going to ask me to try out for the volleyball team and for a moment I am happy. But already my neck and shoulders are starting to ache from the strain of jumping around, and then I remember what the volleyball uniform looks like.

She doesn’t say anything about the team, though. She doesn’t even say I did a good job. She asks me for an email address. She has her phone out and says, “I’m sending you a link.” She hits a couple things with her thumb and slides it back in her pocket. “It’s not strictly school related, though, so don’t get me in trouble,” she says and winks.

Nella is still standing under the basketball hoop with a few boys around her. Ms. R yells over, “The last one in this gym will take down the nets and put away the balls, and no, I will not write you a late pass.”

The boys scatter, except for Griffin. Nella has him by the arm, preventing him from leaving the gym before me. “Run, Greer! I’ve got him!” she yells and laughs. “Go!”

Chapter 10

The summer after second grade, I saw a video of Emma Watson when she had really short hair and I told my mother that I wanted a haircut. Right before school started she took me to get a pixie cut. They clipped up past my hairline in the back, and over my right ear, leaving long bangs on one side, the kind that are always falling into one eye. I remember how light my head felt when I walked out, and how fast it dried after a bath. When I see pictures now, I love it. I look like an adorable little boy.

Nella, who had had superlong hair when we left school in June, also happened to return with a short pixie cut, one side longer than the other. It wasn't exactly the same, because her hair is darker than mine, hers fell into her right eye and mine into my left, and because she already had her ears pierced so no one ever thought she was a boy.

It was close enough, though, that for most of that school year, parents and substitute teachers mixed us up all the time. They'd call me Nella and her Greer (or they'd call me Ella and her Gwen, because we both have the kind of names people don't quite

believe). Kids in other grades would say “You look exactly like that other kid.” And anybody who didn’t know us would say, “Did you plan it?”

With some kids, that would be enough to start a rivalry. The cooler or cuter or meaner kid would resist the comparison. She’d try to distinguish herself or say the other one copied her. It happens when other people try to lump you in with someone else. The two shortest boys in the grade always hate each other. The three kids at the peanut allergy table can’t stand each other.

But Nella ate it up. Right away on the first day when we saw each other, she came up to me and said, “Greer! We’re haircut twins! WE’RE HAIRCUT TWINS!” and held the sides of my arms and bounced like this was the best news she ever heard, even though we only knew each other from school. “AND WE HAVE THE SAME BACKPACK ALMOST!” Her Fjällräven pack was light green with yellow straps; mine was bright blue with yellow straps.

It didn’t make us friends exactly, but for the next few months at least, we were, in her mind and everybody else’s, the haircut twins.

So that’s why it’s especially weird for her to be the most perfect-looking person in my school, and for me to be me. The idea that anyone would ever mistake me and Nella at this point makes as much sense as mistaking a gazelle and a rhinoceros. (I’m the rhino, obviously. A Sumatran—the kind with two horns.)

We both grew out our cuts, because having that kind of hairstyle when you’re a kid kind of sucks. There’s not enough to make a ponytail, which means there’s always hair hanging in your face,

which turns out to be annoying as hell. If I hadn't discovered headbands I never would have made it through third grade. Nella's hair grew faster, and she could actually do tiny French braids by the time fourth grade started. Everything else on Nella grew faster, too, but on her, it stopped where it should have.

We've never talked about it, but I think she still feels like we have some connection. Or at least history. Not enough that we'd hang out or be friends outside of social media. But something. That's how it is with Nella and everybody. She has this way of responding to a person that makes them feel like it's nice to be in her orbit. Not just that they want to date her, but also that they just want to sit by her or joke with her or be her haircut twin. All are welcome in the universe she sits so perfectly comfortably at the center of.

And maybe it's that, even more than the perfect boobs, that I'm most jealous of.

If I could wake up in Nella's body one morning, I might still be an awkward mess. But, god, would I love to try.