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Familiar Flesh

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Familiar Flesh

Author Bio

My name is Bethany Shifflett, I am 19 years old, and I grew up only 15 minutes away from Gettysburg! I have always had this intense passion for all forms of writing; specifically poetry. But, through my Intro to Creative Writing course I took this year as a freshman, I think creative nonfiction may be my new favorite! I plan to major in English with a writing concentration, and a possible art studio minor!

Familiar Flesh

BETHANY N. SHIFFLETT

At an embarrassing age, I still slept in my mom's bed. Instead of sleeping by her side, like a normal person, I chose a starfish-like way of latching onto her. My head rested on her belly while my tiny arms sunk into the rest of her stomach. Like I fit into a perfect mold. Thoughts of what lurked underneath the bed when my foot would dangle off were comforted by the squishy feeling of my mom beneath me. The death grip on her nightgown definitely helped too. I felt secure, the way the jiggles of her stomach while she snored felt like a lullaby.

I never knew anything different; my mom was my mom. That was until I noticed the small things, before I discovered who she truly was. Whether it was a Back-to-School Night, dance recital, or just walking through Kennie's on a random Saturday; I could see the stares. I was awoken by the sight of the forever empty seat next to her. Or how they used their eyes to scan her body before they ever met her face. I would start to hang my head down, only looking at our feet as we held hands. Inviting a friend over after school always introduced a look of disbelief, *that's your mom?* Our faces may have looked similar, but our bodies sure didn't. No one had to say anything to us, I could feel the presence of it. I caught a glimpse of other mothers, with their skinny legs, and small waists. None of them had bellies that spilled over their pants. *Why was I the cursed one? Why couldn't I just have a mom who looked like me?*

Field trips were always a confusing time for me. I was so excited initially when my mom wanted to join my class at the zoo or a museum as a chaperone. We could feel like everyone else. But once those days would come, I would sit on the bus chewing at the inside of my cheek. I already knew what the day was going to look like: a long trek to see the bear enclosure or taking the stairs up to the next floor of the science center; it always ended the same. A break, a pause, a breather. Whatever she called it, she needed to rest. I would look around at the other groups and see their parent's ability to keep going. Why couldn't she just be normal? I could feel the embarrassment paint itself on my cheeks as my friends kept asking why we were going so slow. I felt relieved when she said she couldn't go on field

trips with me anymore.

My mom's bed had not always been shared between the both of us. My dad never had been *there*, even if he was physically. Leaving us to Sharpie on the sunroom walls or put an entire tube of lotion in the water during bath time. One thing he did not budge on, however, was his domain over the bedroom while my mom worked. My mom had always worked night shifts at the hospital, leaving Bailey and me in the 'care' of our father. I was too young to remember a lot of the time before the divorce, but I do know that he was cheating. I can recall the mysterious late-night visitors sneaking in through the basement. Not necessarily what they looked like, but I can assume. My mom was at her heaviest at this time. Too busy working and caring for her young daughters when home to prioritize herself. Can't say the same for my father though, his 'wants' were the only thing he cared about. I guess he wanted someone to look the same as he did; slim and tall.

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We always ate early, around 3 so we could have something before our dance classes. Bailey and I's plates were always loaded to the brim; pasta spilling out from the plate, or a mountain of mashed potatoes piled high. Mom always said we needed enough to fuel us during our six-hour lessons, and it did. I felt active and it showed through my ambitions to dance. I did every genre of dance available for my small studio: ballet, lyrical, acro, contemporary, jazz, and even hip-hop. I thrived off trophies, medals, and high scores at dance competitions. My legs lifted to the sky and leaps catapulted me across the room. As I looked at myself in mirrors that coated the studio walls, my smile grew wider. I always thought if I just kept dancing, *I would never look like my mom*. As long as I stayed doing these splits or aerials, or sucked in my stomach as we did pirouettes across the floor; *I could remain thin for the rest of my life*.

I could always tell when Mom started a new diet plan. While our bellies remained bloated, filled to the brim with our dinner, I would look across the dining room table to see nothing in front of my mom. Bailey would always ask if she was going to eat dinner with us before dance, which my mother always said she'd fix herself a container for work. I still think there wasn't anything in her bag when she left. Or if she got us food out, which was a rare treat, she would never get herself anything. I would yell at myself anytime I forgot about one of her diets, by asking if she want-

ed one of my nuggets or a slice of pizza. As if I was tempting her, that if she took just one bite, she would never lose weight. I was so selfish then; how could I think like that when my mom was hurting herself? Why did I think her actions were admirable, that these were the necessary sacrifices to be made?

Her *Weight Watchers* or *Nutrisystem* programs would never last too long. Once she lost around twenty pounds or fifty sometimes, it wouldn't be long before she would start eating again. Normally eating. Like, the average quantities of food you're supposed to be eating. But of course, when you have been starving yourself, anything feels a lot. When there was a rough night at work, she'd feed that pain with a bag of Lays. Binge eating was for her like a relapse is for drug addicts. And so, the weight loss journey would start over and over again. With every cycle, the aspiration to keep going slowly deteriorated.

In middle school, I was proud to show off my body. The tightest leggings and tiny crop tops did not leave much of anything to the imagination. And I was happily supplying myself as an object of attraction. I craved the stares this time, the stares were for me only. I got dressed in the hopes I would catch the glances made on my body walking from class to class. Older boys would want to talk to me and give me the attention I was so hungry for. When I would stare back at myself in those photos I'd send, I knew I was desirable. I felt a rush when hitting send, that my body was a prize to be won. All I could think was, *at least I didn't look like her*. When I got my first real boyfriend, I was excited to be more than just a good body to someone. I think I just wanted to feel as though I could be the "wife-material" my mother never was, AKA skinny.

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Finances were something my mom never talked about with us until we got much older. With every birthday or Christmas, nothing felt amiss. It seemed like everything on my ten-page wish list or heavily circled toy catalog was there. I know now that wasn't easy to achieve. Even when my parents were together; my mom was exclusively the 'breadwinner', 'wore the pants', etc. My dad never managed to keep a job, and still can't. After the divorce, my dad took the fastest drive home to his own parents, leaving my mom with full custody, without a lick of child support ever being handed over. Bailey and I were lucky if we got twenty dollars in the mail. My mom is a Registered Nurse, and a supervisor over the entire hospital. Up and down the floors; moving from the ER to PACU in a matter of minutes for whoever needs her. *I can't believe how ignorant I was about the amount of work my mom did*. Basically, like a vampire, she would rise from her bed

at 2 p.m. and work from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., for five nights in a row. Not only did she grind herself to a pulp for work, literally helping others, but she did it all while having sole responsibility for us. *She is so powerful; she has conquered more difficulties than I could imagine. I could only dream of being even a fraction like her.*

The summer before Sophomore year, I decided to quit dance. I begged my mom to let me quit sooner before the recital. But she said she already paid for it and needed to finish it out. Back then, I didn't really understand the way my new pointe shoes or costumes were more of a priority to my mom than a house payment. That my interests amounted to more than the money we had. I decided to stop dancing because, at even the practices, it began to feel like a performance. I no longer felt like I enjoyed it, that my reasons for being there had finally gone stale. Dancing for ten years straight to just suddenly stop, there was a drastic change. *Where was I going to spend that free time?* I had so much more time to spend on school and schoolwork. Today, it's still hard for me to relinquish myself from Dancer Bethany. I can't stop eating the same way I did when I was dancing. All those carbs were worked off within hours of rehearsals. *Why do I not know when to just let that chapter end?*

Four years together feels unrecognizable. I even look unrecognizable. Not just the transition from side-part to middle, but my weight too. When we went to Walmart it seemed like a normal occurrence, nothing felt out of the ordinary. His mother wanted us to look for pants for his little sisters, which I agreed to eagerly, to please her. As we walked through the aisles, the fall clothes had just been put out. So many cute sweaters and flared leggings seemed to flood my eyes. When I glanced over at the nearest pair of sweatpants, I sighed at all the extra smalls and smalls overcrowding the racks. I had already felt inferior, like I should attempt to suffocate my thighs into my own denial. He then noticed something in the sweater aisle, "This would be perfect for her!" he exclaimed about his little sister. As innocent as his comment was, I thought to myself at that moment, *has he ever thought that about me?* I don't get to wear his clothes like they are some cute, oversized hoodies like other couples. Just like his sister, he's slender and lanky. Practically his whole family are the same carbon-copied skinny people, the perfect family. We are literally the exact opposite. *I'm repeating history. Maybe he wishes he was with someone just like him, just like my father did.*

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Our love for each other radiates in our conversations. Whether it is my bad test scores in math or mom losing a friendship of many years

(not dead, just a bitch), we use these times to bond. Our in-sync sobs ring together through the house like a choir, as I wrap myself around her arms. We park outside our fast-food chain, eat, and discuss whatever drama has ensued lately. These therapy sessions are almost like rituals for us, a way we can expel whatever tears we have been asphyxiating on.

If I could somehow manage to nestle myself back onto my mom's belly and stay there, I would for the both of us. When I would lay there and feel her love without hearing it. The innocence, the lack of shame I felt towards her. I resent myself for feeling that way towards my mom once I noticed how others looked down on her. She has done nothing but love me unconditionally my whole life, for me to feel ashamed of her during my childhood. I was so comfortable separating myself from my mom, and because I was thinner, I felt above her. I suffer to catch up to my past disgust with the fierce protection I have towards my mother now. I see myself in my mom too; the desire to feel loved, to feel needed. When I look into the mirror; all I see are the stretch marks on my hips peaking out past my jeans, and my stomach spilling over my zipper. I weep at the sight of the scale's number increasing as I tiptoe onto it. I tremble at the thought of my mom starving herself but consider doing it myself.

I treasure my mom's belly but look at my own, expanding, with contempt.