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## Under the Skin

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“Take off all your clothes and lie down,” she said.

A whitewashed room. Overly air-conditioned. Fluorescent lights. Linoleum floors. Shiny machines. A stiff chair to put my clothes on.

“Even my bra?”

“Yep, that, too because the metal clasps will throw everything off.”

Covering my breasts with my elbows, I slinked onto the table and rolled over, trying to move my limbs so they would fit within the lines the lab technician indicated. I don’t even remember her name, this technician at the University of Arizona Body Composition Lab—the procedure happened so fast. But she was nice enough, all smiles and nods of encouragement as I lay still, trying not to breathe too deeply because movement also throws off the results of a bone density scan.

Such scans are pretty much routine for women over the age of sixty (my mom has had two), because significant changes in hormone levels after menopause put them at risk for bone loss. Bone density scans aren’t too common for thirty-year-

olds unless they've not gone through puberty in the first place.

This is the story of my bones.

When you're a child, doctors tell you a lot of things. They tell you to drink milk so you'll grow strong bones. They tell you to run around on the playground because exercise is good for you. They tell you to eat carrots so you can see in the dark. They don't tell you that you reach your peak bone mass around age twenty. They don't tell you too much exercise can stunt your growth. They don't tell you that nutrition is complicated and that you need certain vitamins and minerals to help with the absorption of other vitamins and minerals. They tell you about dos and don'ts instead of about balance. They give you a checklist to follow, not a life.

Ballet dancers have a different checklist. I used to pull my hair tight to my scalp and pin it down, no loose ends sticking out. I'd grab a water bottle and look into my big dance bag. Pink tights. Check. Black leotard. Check. Canvas ballet slippers (because canvas makes your feet look better than leather). Check. Satin pointe shoes (plus the padding for the toes). Check. Band-Aids. Check. In those days I walked like a duck with my feet splayed out, pitter-patter to the studio. I looked funny with my stick limbs and upturned nose. Dancers often walk with their chin up, stretching for something just out of reach. One day I caught a glimpse of my reflection in an old weathered window, the glass all distorted rows of sine waves. My head was elliptical and my cheeks were at dif-

ferent latitudes, and all my facial features blurred and smeared into one another.

As a teenager, I stayed under my skin—flat chest, a hair or two barely budding beneath my arms, hips nailed in their narrow configuration atop wispy legs. I blew around the dance floor in choreographed androgyny, trying to stay balanced, controlled, not distinguishing between the two.

Lying naked on the DEXA scan table, I could feel my breath pulse within the crevices of my ribcage like it used to before a dance performance. Shy and self-conscious. A thin shell of youth. I always performed as unearthly creatures—the somber fairy or the ethereal sprite, dancing slow adagios in white gauzy fabric.

“Relax, but don’t move,” she said. Gloves on. White coat. Hair pulled back. Kind face. She said everything gently. When the scanning machine scoured my body, I didn’t feel a thing, but it thudded and thudded. When I breathe, I usually let my ribcage puff out, but I held back even after she was done, even after she left the room. I held back while I put my clothes on and pulled back my hair. My jaw bit down. My stomach tightened.

The machine read the language of my hips and my spine, calculated my percent body fat, and sent the information into little pixels that shifted on screen in the shape of a skeleton, the geometry of my body. It seemed to know my body better than I did. It knew that my bones were hollowing out like the bones of a menopausal woman. Osteopenia, the precursor to osteoporosis. It’s a quiet decay, invisible from the outside. Nearly half of all women

will have it and a quarter of all men, but they might not know it until they break a bone.

Hormones are like the body's words, communicating when to break down and when to build cells. Any change in the body's regular hormone system, such as loss of estrogen during menopause (or the delay of periods during puberty), causes the body to break down more than build up. It's called aging. I thought of my now-deceased grandmother with her stooped spine and rounded shoulders. Silver hair. The fragile way she moved about the world. People always told me I had my grandmother's long, slim legs, but I never shared her curvy upper half. I kept myself within the gangly walls of childhood. While I balanced on my toes during the critical growing years, undernourished and overworked, my body never knew how to grow. I didn't have enough chemical syntax, so by the time eighteen rolled around and I quit dancing, and all the other girls had breasts and boyfriends and painted their nails, I had already done the damage. Through my body exterior, I froze time, but my insides operated in a different chronology. They aged.

When I left the lab with my bone density results in hand, I couldn't decide how old I really was. I only see my surface—smooth hands, a constellation of freckles, my tangle of blue-green veins just below the skin. People tell me I look younger than thirty. They tell me I could pass as nineteen. Sometimes I do. They say it's my baby face, how I carry myself, the way I clothe my body in bright orange sweaters and patterned blue jeans (my hollowing bones unexposed).

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