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Jugs

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No, Noni--not *Ephraim* like that little town in Utah (I know we're both broke but we've got to talk on the phone sometimes). It's spelled like that but pronounced like the actor Efrem Zimbalist, Jr.

Dad just calls him "F."

After I passed Ephraim's lessons, relearning how to rollerskate, in the underground garage of his Santa Monica apartment, I bought my own white-boot Chicagos, with white toe-brakes, and red wheels and laces, and started meeting Big Sister Maggie, sun or fog, down at the boardwalk Sundays, where we roll onto brunch patios, then later skate north on the Venice speedway and the Ocean Front bike path to the Santa Monica pier and back. And, every time I skate by this one pavilion, this same bum from the shadows off the speedway--hat brim pulled down over his eyes, bottle-shaped brown paper bag on his lap--in a flat, resonant baritone--says, "Jugs."

You were there when I went straight past needing a training bra to stealing a 34C from my mom's dresser drawer rather than walk through the embarrassment of shopping for one with her. She always made such a big deal. Would I have eventually taken her bra shopping with me if she'd lived long enough to see me turn twelve, let alone top-off at a 37D?

So, Dr. Kohner says I should get a "breast reduction." *Have you heard of this?* He got me to talk to the plastic surgeon in his building, Dr. Zeitman. And I saw pictures in his office, before-and-after's.

Dr. Kohner--who's kind of like an uncle (back in the '50s, he and my dad and my mom went to U.C.L.A. together)--has been trying to get me-the-woman to see a certain reality in relation to my breasts. He says things like, *In order to do the pencil test on you, we'd need to use the whole box* Point being my breasts sag enough already to hold up however many pencils would be in a box, along with the box they came in.

Ha ha.

Dr. Kohner says not to jog, not to play tennis, and don't ride horses: *You'll give yourself a black eye. . . .* Rollerskating is semi-okay. And swimming. Maybe riding a bike. He says, *If you don't have this surgery done, I'm afraid you'll be tuckin' 'em in your belt by the time you're thirty. . . .*

Thanks, Uncle Bob.

I'm still trying to get used to the idea of the *possibility* of this, and now I'm supposed to hurry and make up my mind because Dad's Writers Guild insurance won't cover me once I'm finished being "eighteen" (which really means they'll cover me through *nineteen* years--a concept I can't believe I have to argue--but what's to figure?--when you turn an age, you're not just *beginning* to be that age, you've *completed* it; I was finished being eighteen *on* my eighteenth birthday).

The reduction wouldn't be classified as cosmetic surgery. Of course, it involves cosmetic surgery--lots of it--but Doctors Kohner and Zeitman and my gynecologist, Dr. David, are recommending it as preventative surgery. Breast cancer not only runs on Mom's side of the family but on Dad's too. When I'm back down to a 34C, Doctors Kohner and Zeitman and David predict, potentially dangerous lumps can be detectable more easily. Right now, my breast exams consist of wading around in so much fibrous tissue, fingertips disappear at their first knuckles. (And mammography hurts--I don't care what anybody says--each compressed pendulum vised between cold, hard plates.)

Big Sister Maggie, who is still barely a B-cup, says--"If you actually do this, have them save some for me, okay?"

What, in a jar?

Ephraim listens, and winces, and is about as mature about this as he can be, considering it's the future of my breasts we're talking about.

But knowing there's something *to* talk about--a choice suddenly--I'm intrigued.

They may be a turn-on, a comfort, and beautiful--somehow--to Ephraim, but he doesn't have to carry them around with him--I now have stretch marks beginning on my shoulders. And I'm still a skinny gal! It's still a nightmare buying off-the-rack. Everything's got to be too tight or too loose somewhere, or too old-ladyish. I've been getting bathing suits custom made since I was thirteen.

Did I tell you this? Once, at the highrise beach apartment Dad and Maggie and I first moved to from Montana, I was tanning on a lounge on the other side of the pool from our building, facing the ocean. And, when someone approached me from behind, I looked over my shoulder and saw it was Dad. He did an utterly-disgusted W. C. Fields impression--arms, elbows, and all--and then just turned and marched away. Much later, he admitted he had spotted at the pool, from his home-office window, a knock-out broad he'd never seen before, and when he went down to meet her, she was me.

*

I am giving blood at Cedars-Sinai, a week apart, two times, for my self. In the event that I need a transfusion during surgery, I'll be able to receive my own. I made up my mind in time to safely bank enough, fully recover, and have surgery before my nineteenth birthday (the nineteenth anniversary of my birthday). Yes, it's happening fast. Surgery like this isn't cheap. It's major. And it's probably now-or-never.

I'll walk into my twenties, into the '80s, a Renaissance Woman--a C-cup again.

Can you *imagine*?

I'm hoping, by then, the scars will be faded. The scars I saw in photos were still dark, pink at best, after however long. Not long. This kind of surgery's still so innovative, still so new.

On each breast, the shape of a ship's anchor. I'll spare you for now.

*

This is how it goes. When I settle in for, or when I wake up from, sleep--now I notice more consciously--when I'm on my side, my left side for instance, my left boob is cradled in and overflows the crook of my left elbow and biceps separating it and the mattress, while my right arm nestles vertically up the center of my chest, hand below my chin, separating my right breast from flubbing over and sticking to my left, and my right breast is cradled on the inside (upside) of my right arm.

When I sleep next to Ephraim, I'm always ready to shield my breasts with my arms--from being rolled on, pinched together, pinned to the mattress, or to him.

I move in a constant, unconscious dance of self-protection.

*

Get ready, because this is not pretty: I mean it. You might as well hear now, though, they're going to literally remove my nipples and areolas and set them aside for a moment, nerves and lifelines intact, so they can slice down the front and center of each of my breasts and then make horseshoe-like incisions from one side to the other that will be scars eventually, about where my under-wires will actually ride when I'm wearing a normal bra again. Some of the tissue, once inspected, is going to be pushed higher on my (in some sense flat) chest and reshaped into 34Cs. The other three inches and a cup size will be discarded, unless Maggie wants to make arrangements on her own (leave me out of it). My nipples won't be put *back*, per se, but put where they need to be on my new breasts, hopefully still in working order.

Doctors Kohner and Zeitman have warned me--worse that could happen is I'll end up with nip-numbness. Although, I could just as easily regain all sensitivity and then some.

They also say it's possible, one day, I might even be able to breast feed.

*

Before I was admitted to Cedars, Dr. Zeitman, at his office, marked up my breasts with black ink and blue.

Later, in my hospital room, when he went over the map of surgery with the others, they stood there pointing pens at me, at my enormous, bottom-heavy, stretch-

marky, lop-sided pair of tits, adding little touches to Dr. Frankenzeitman's existing diagrams. And I wondered, if these guys who are going to reduce me to a C-cup had met me--or, rather, had encountered these boobs--in their outside worlds, would they (do they) find them perfectly fine or actually desirable as they are now? As men--not as doctors--are they, on the inside, feeling a little like Ephraim is?

Scars like anchors.

*

I was in surgery for more than five hours. I can't remember--did somebody say *eight* hours between the time the anaesthesiologist asked me to begin counting backwards from one hundred and I rolled my eyes at him but I couldn't get much past ninety-nine, and the time when I woke up in post-op to Wingate, my nurse, without a bow-tie and in a gown with the same print as I was wearing? I gave him a hard time for stealing my thunder, or at least my chance at making an individual fashion statement on such an important day. I felt wicked--I loved everyone--like a benevolent, mischievous drunk they were wheeling away from the bar.

*

Day after surgery, my nineteenth birthday, and Wingate has stolen for me--"borrowed," he said, over a royal-blue herringbone bow-tie--a little fridge from the "Liz Taylor

memorial suite" upstairs. Wingate said, "She has nothing scheduled."

People brought champagne and wine, and there ended up being *three* cakes. And Dr. Zeitman almost fainted dead away when he walked in on me in bed, opening a bottle of wine, because I should not be using my bottle-popping, cork-pulling muscles. I offered him a glass.

I think Ephraim is relieved that I'm feeling no pain and have such round-the-clock attention, so he could duck out and away from this--the reality of what's under my gown right now, what's under these bandages--with a clean conscience. There are *tubes* coming out of me--on both sides--*drainage* dripping.

It's a done deal.

*

I've been recuperating at home rather than camping at Ephraim's or shifting the balance at Maggie and Tighe's. Dad's current project is still in development and he's working from his home-office these days--there's always somebody around. And here there is room for visitors to play some pool, swim, do a barbeque--become occupied by something, someone, other than me--and I don't feel so bored, or so boring. Daytime and evenings I lie around in the master bedroom taking drugs and watching TV, French doors open to the patio, hall door open to the pool room. Work doesn't call much any more, asking, again, how to crack my rolodex coding even though I left them a template--asking, Where's the grip-truck-rental file?--asking, Where's the good coffee?

They're in chaos, shooting one commercial and casting the next, and I fall asleep on the phone. What do they expect?

No drug can numb completely, though, the reality I'm beginning to face, now that I'm changing my own dressing--undressing and redressing the wound of me. It's hard to imagine I'll ever look natural, ever show my naked body to another human past those who did this to me (or *for* me--it's yet to be determined). I think of Mom, and how she must have felt when Dad looked at her, and what it was like for him, looking at her, half of her a scar.

I've found, though, that the uglier I get, the better it is on my head. Because, the more unnatural I become in my own eyes--the Frankenzeitman stitches, and the bruises turning not only purple and blue but yellow and *green*--the more I'm reminded that after what I've been through--which looks like a fucking car wreck so it's okay if I stand in front of the full-length and cry--I obviously have a lot of serious healing to do before I'll even *begin* to recognize (hopefully) when I look at myself in the mirror any resemblance to a woman's real body.

*

I visit Dr. Zeitman on an appointment schedule that goes like this: twice, once, twice a week, coinciding with each new event and stage and official transition of my planned recovery. If everything goes as scheduled, my visits will gradually taper off, until soon

I'll be licensed to operate these new boobs on my own for a lifetime. In the meantime, Dr. Zeitman is eager to see me, examines me like I'm an important experiment, and I watch his face to see if I am looking all right. Believe me, only he can tell.

I wear (doctor's orders) a soft Warner bra that fastens in the front. And I've been measured for a Pressure Bra--by prescription--a massive, harness-like thing that will apply all the right kinds of pressure to each of my scars once dressing's off--to promote better healing--not very sexy.

I'm not allowed to drive for three weeks after surgery, so Ephraim has been spending time with me at Dad's--bringing laserdisc movies from home to play on Dad's twin first-one-on-the-block machine; then he started picking me up and taking me out (his Bug, Lady, is perfect--no shoulder straps). We've been to some movies more than once so Ephraim can, again, check out the music--Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby*, *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Beatty's Heaven Can Wait*. And last Friday he took me home to Santa Monica for the weekend.

He's squeamish about sleeping with me, body-to-body close, but he wants me there with him.

He isn't worrying out loud about our age difference. I haven't heard "When you're twenty-one I'll be thirty-one" in forever.

He doesn't want to see me beyond the bras, but I find him staring, getting used to the new look, the new shape of me.

I don't think he'll be too squeamish too much longer.

I feel like I'm winning something over or pulling something over on my former boobs--my original equipment. What does that mean exactly?

*

No, Noni, not like "tie" --Tighe, like "tea" with a "G" on the end. He's seventeen years older than Maggie and has already been married and divorced twice. I'm not sure they should have, but they finally set a date.

Ephraim's been married "nonce," he says, which doesn't hurt when it comes to Dad forgiving him our age difference--that, and the fact that as you know my boyfriends have always been older. Plus, Dad introduced me to Ephraim, who composed the scores of a couple of his Westerns (I didn't plan it, I think I wrote you, but one day, Ephraim was playing guitar for me, and when he finished, I kissed him, and that was that).

But Tighe--with Dad--is still trying to live down the impression he established last summer, when *I*, fresh from high school, made that exploratory mistake of moving to Dallas with Russel (who I'd met through Tighe) when his company relocated him. And when I needed to get out of it--even though I was perfectly capable of executing a departure on my own right away, Dad wanted to book Maggie on a flight to Dallas so she could guarantee my safe exit and then drive back with me, and Tighe accused Dad of being presumptuous and complained about the inconvenience of being without

Maggie those few days, and ever since then, Dad has called Tighe "The Wimp" --though rarely, since that night, to his face (and, even then, it was over the phone). Poor Tighe. He tries to be helpful in other ways.

Maggie now has the in's Downtown, in the garment district, at the Mart, because Tighe's partnered in a unisex jeans company. Maggie's helping me dress my new shape in the latest on the cheap. It's so fun to wear clothes--I had no idea! I can even dress sexy now and still look "innocent"--in tops that are gauzy or knit, somewhat diaphanous, over nude bras or camisoles--or I can wear loud and tight--and still not draw the kinds of attention I did when I was practically trying to hide in my clothes.

I can see now, too, I must have subconsciously been letting my butt go and get bigger than it should be in an attempt to balance myself out. But, I don't need this ballast any more, and Coach Ephraim says he's going to have me jogging around the Santa Monica high-school track, a few blocks away from his apartment, as soon as I'm permitted. He says to call it "SaMo."

Maybe I'll even quit smoking.

*

Although my visible stitches are out (I'll spare you the details of that), there are still sutures on the inside of me that will never need to be taken out but will disintegrate on their own.

On the outside, instead of stitches, I wear a light tape that encourages stitchless seams growing together.

I know. Enough.

The part I allow to fascinate me instead is--when I went in for surgery, I had a bandeau-bathingsuit tanline straight across my chest, above (of course) my nipples (then). And now the same tanline is *below* the horse shoes, a little below where the under-wires would go. My breasts are now under the skin that use to be entirely *above* the level of my nipples. My breasts--if you can get past the wounds and the discolorations, you'd see--except for nipples and areolas--are completely suntanned.

*

Okay, this is how it happened. As soon as I was allowed to full-on shower again--strip down, get in, let the water pelt me all over--I was nervous, but it felt great. Something about standing there, like normal, soaping myself all at once, made me feel like all one skin, one fluid body again, and my showers went quickly back to being routine. And part of the routine is that, in my section of the house, the hot water goes fast. In my former life, I guess I hadn't really been aware of how, routinely, in order to economize, I had rinsed under each breast and its corresponding armpit at the same time. Imagine a flamenco dancer. First I would hold my right arm above my head, and, as I offered that armpit to the water, the back of my left hand would swing over to lift up my right

breast and allow the spray access to its underside; then I'd repeat the same movements on my left. And that's how I got the black eye. Where the back of my hand went to lift up a breast there was air.

*

Dad was having an Emmy party. The big TV was on in the living room, and so were the ones in the dining room and kitchen and pool room. And some of us were watching in the master bedroom on Dad's landing-pad of a bed.

Dad's agent Evelyn kept saying--"*Ol' Red Hair is Back* is a terrible title."

And Maggie said, "Is her hair *really* red?"

And Tighe said, "I've seen her pubic hair."

And Evelyn asked, "When have you *ever* seen Bette Midler's pubic hair?"

And Tighe said, "I *have*. In the showroom one time!"

"And this from a man," Maggie said, "who confuses Shirley Jones and Florence Henderson. God knows whose pubic hair you're actually thinking of."

"I wasn't 'thinking'! Bette Midler came in, and Florence Henderson didn't. She didn't close the changing room door! It was a red triangle!"

Ephraim asked, "You get Mrs. Partridge and Mrs. Brady mixed up?"

Maggie said, "He gets Ed Asner and Carroll O'Connor confused too."

Did you watch? It was funny--*Lou Grant* and *All in the Family* were really

walking away with it.

Except for the blaring TV and my own laughter, the room went silent. All eyes were on *me*. "*What?*"

Maggie winced and said--"You're lying on your stomach!"

I was.

But I had a pillow underneath me. Now I was aware of the pressure, though, an unnatural pull. I wasn't hurting. It wasn't even uncomfortable until I thought about it. The idea of lying on my breasts *without* a pillow does, however, make me cringe like Maggie did.

"Please turn over," she begged me. "Sit up!"

They feel like a part of me now. But not like they've grown from me. Like they've grown attached.

*

Ephraim and I finally had sex, made love, fucked, for the first time since before surgery.

I kept my bra on, for both my protection and his.

The term "training bra" finally makes sense to me, because Ephraim and I are re-learning things about ourselves and each other and us two together--and, no matter how hokey this sounds, it seems we're both literally and figuratively in training to finally bare ourselves.

He wouldn't do it, though, unless I stayed on top--and, oh my god. It's a whole

different thing when those giant, saggy breasts aren't swinging around between us.

Through my clothes even, my nipples are not numb--they're more sensitive than ever.

In general, I feel as if I'm on one side of a window after curtains, old heavy drapes, have been taken down--and people on the other side can see in clearly now. And I can actually see them seeing me.

The way Ephraim looks at me now makes me want to cry.

*

What I notice most? Even more amazing to me than the ease and rewards of buying off-the-rack is this *eye contact*.

My boss suddenly says, "You're too pretty to wear so much makeup"--like he's never seen my face before. Like a film has been stripped down between us.

I feel peeled.

I can't make sense without clichés.

I feel freed.

I'm no longer using the tape and--when I'm not wearing the Pressure Bra--I can wear form-fitting bras with no-guilt, no-fear-tight tops, like a regular person. Even tube-tops!

Yesterday, in the middle of the production office, our assistant director Walt

looked me square in the eyes and said, "Great tits!" --like, "Congratulations!"

Before, this kind of observation would never have been so open, would not have seemed so friendly, was something I dreaded, something done to me, a curse, a spell I had nothing to do with casting. And, *before*, Walt would've blushed ten shades if I'd caught him even glancing at my "rack," my "melons," my "tah-tahs." But now I've got great tits *and* eye contact, which I never would have realized was something I was missing. The difference is, now looks aren't done to me--they aren't at me--looks are shared.

*

Ephraim's afraid I'm going to leave him. What a switch.

He says I'm different, that the change on the outside has brought a change to the inside, that something has switched in me. Luckily, I can best explain it now, while I am just grasping it myself--the actual switch--can record the difference somewhat objectively. Have *I* changed, or has the world I'm walking around doing my business in changed?--into an alternate reality, as they say, or *something*. . . . Like some weird reflection-pool thing is going on. A layer of gel, or gauze, like the thinnest layer of onion, a skin, a film, has been lifted--and the same world beneath behaves differently.

For instance, here--now--in this universe--I am suddenly taken seriously. It's like the eye-contact thing all over again--I mainly know I was missing it before because of

it's prevalence now. It's a relief not feeling like I have to yell in order to be heard at least as clearly as other gals who've got a thing or two to say, to contribute, on the job or otherwise. It's refreshing, renewing to be taken for a balanced package, rather than for boobs with a big mouth and thank-god brains. Even Ephraim's friend, Richard, who seems to think in cartoons, used to say--before--that I was a cross between Little Annie Fanny and Charlotte Bronte (whatever that means or looks like). He and Ephraim have always had fun characterizing--caricaturing--me in terms of dichotomies. What cross next? What am I now?

I'm into capitalizing on this new thing at work and seeing how life changes. I like how being taken seriously, openly considered, allows me to consider myself more seriously. Ephraim said that doesn't make sense but then he admitted it does. *Of course* I want to be more than a secretary, more than a P.A. I had to ask Ephraim, does he want to end up with a woman he has to support? I think not. Do I want to be supported by Ephraim? No. Now that he's responding to me with such near abandon, I'm wondering what he sees in me.

I feel like making some changes, but I don't think he's one of them.

I've never completely supported myself. I've never been out on my own.

*

I'm not allowed to jog yet, but I am permitted to wear a jogging bra rollerskating. I must be careful not to make wild movements and to steer clear of the wild movements

of others and, as usual, must be careful about falling. But Maggie skates guard. She's beginning to act more protective of me, says I'm finally beginning to seem like her "little" sister again. You know how new people meeting us always thought I was the oldest.

Again, she and I have taken up meeting down at the boardwalk, rolling onto restaurant patios in shorts and legwarmers, sweatshirts tied around our waists, for brunch, while the haze burns off. We splurge on everything *we'll* burn off skating north to the pier and back. Then, as usual, we head up the speedway, toward the Ocean Front bike path. Difference is, now, when we skate by that one bum's pavilion, I can't explain how weird it is, but he doesn't say a thing.