

## At the Clinic

As they put Mum to sleep her head knocks back and her mouth opens with the shape of the moon. I expect more resistance, for fear to flood her eyes and for her to strike the needle from the surgeon's fist. But she surrenders easily, in a way that reminds me of first love. Scissors, clamps and scalpels dance like fairyflies above her pearly chin.

I'm the one who doesn't surrender so easily. In the refrigerated room, a gasp escapes my mouth. The cannula goes in. I hurry to stop the doctors who dig into her with tubes and tools.

'We can't stop now, miss. She has signed the waiver and paid the procedure fee.'

'Miss, I'll need you to step outside for a glass of water.'

'Miss, you can't be here. You were told to stay in reception.'

Regret is certain, like the sudden feeling of fullness that hits after a binge. What have I done.

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Three months earlier, I stood dropping coins into the cashier at the Little Roaster. The smell of freshly brewed coffee condensed in the air, sweetened by melted cheese and buttered toast. Days crawled by as I watched ribbons drag trams across Toorak Road. Blonde bobs fluttered in and out of the wind-chimed doors, collecting croissants. Some of their features evidenced clear signs of the procedure. Their chins lifted elegantly above their neck and their waists curled unnaturally far inwards.

The sky blushed after the café closed. I sprayed tabletops and bleached the bathroom floors. On my walk home in the crisp Melbourne winter, under naked tree branches, I stopped outside the clinic door. It was shut but I peeped inside, checking for a neon head of hair waterfalling over a magazine in the waiting room. The lights were off. The reception desk appeared empty and ghost-like.

The July frost parched my hands into dried banana chips. I tightened my choke on my woollen scarf. My eyes crawled from the dead clinic to the window posters.

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*Contouring for confidence and lifelong happiness.*

*You will never regret your decision to invest in yourself.*

I grabbed a brochure and tucked it deep inside my apron's pocket, among the bundle of glossy papers already stored there. On the bus, my head resting against the dewy window, I re-read the pamphlet.

*Toorak Plastic Surgery takes a holistic approach to bodily alterations.*

The second page. Before and after photos of people showing tummy fat loss, back fat loss and chin reductions.

*Our happy clients after their safe procedures.*

I folded the pamphlet and returned it into my apron, my secret.

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I couldn't remember when I first started to dislike my body.

Time was split in two, a Maxibon. First, there was the chocolate-coated ice cream of my youth, running through the graffitied streets in Footscray, sneakers slapping on fallen coriander leaves and soggy straws.

Then, there was the cookie part, melting and messy. Readjusting my Country Road towel over my legs at St Kilda beach. Around us, girls tanned with ease on their striped beach towels, bikini straps undone around their necks, eyes slanting with sleep.

'What's wrong?' Alison lifted her Gucci sunglasses and narrowed her eyes at me.

'Nothing.'

'You keep fidgeting.' In her neon pink bikini, Alison's ribs looked hardened into fish bones.

'I feel so ... big.'

Alison gasped. 'You're not *big*.'

'I feel that way.'

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She watched me. ‘If you really want to do something about it, I can help you.’

‘How?’ I folded my hands across my one-piece, moving closer to her.

Alison pushed her sunglasses down, covering her cold grey-blue eyes. ‘Only if you *really* want to do something about it.’

\*

Alison was so at ease in the clinic it made me suspicious. She flicked through a *Vogue* magazine in the waiting room, chewing bubblegum. ‘What?’ She caught me staring. My legs were bouncing against the glass stool.

‘You’re so calm,’ I muttered.

Alison flicked the glossy page roughly, using all five manicured fingers. ‘You’re getting the lipo, not me.’

‘But you’ve gotten it before? It’s safe?’

She blew a bubble in her gum and popped it, chewing calmly. ‘Would I take you here if it wasn’t?’

In the consultation room, the surgeon talked me through procedure and costs. The medical certificates on the wall were teeth biting into me. I felt the early pangs of a headache.

*I hereby authorise Dr. Thinham and her assistants to perform liposuction on my abdomen. I have received the following information sheet and risk notice form. I recognise that during the operation and while under anaesthesia unforeseen conditions may arise, and I authorise my surgeon and her assistants to perform any necessary actions to proceed at their discretion. I understand that all forms of anaesthesia involve risk and the possibility of complications, injury and sometimes death. I understand that there are no guarantees for my outcome and that the operation may cause swelling, bruising, scarring, bleeding, nausea and other injuries. I elect to proceed.*

The walls suddenly felt too teal, like a fridge. My mouth dried.

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‘Do you have any questions?’ The surgeon’s pearls swung in the air when she smiled.

Left. Right. Left.

I looked up at Alison, the pen in my hand hovering over the signature box on the consent form. Alison nodded.

Hands shaking, I signed.

\*

In the laneway, I vomited beside an abandoned Boost Juice cup. Alison stood on chopstick legs, lighting a cigarette.

‘Isn’t that stuff going to kill you?’ I panted.

Alison shrugged. ‘I’m going to die anyway.’

‘Seriously, why are you still smoking?’

Alison shrugged again. ‘It makes me not hungry.’

My whole body throbbed and I threw up once more. Unlike Alison, I was always hungry. Hungry for something better, for my dreams.

Alison sat down, ignoring the orange, clumpy puddle on the cobblestones.

‘Everyone in my family has done it. You don’t have to worry,’ she said.

I wiped my mouth. ‘Even your mum?’

Alison chuckled. ‘Especially my mum. Where do you think I got it from?’ Then, to the wall behind the bins, she said, ‘My mum is very weight conscious.’ She puffed her cigarette and the smoke swirled and disappeared into the air.

\*

I didn’t know how to bring up the procedure to Mum. She was in the kitchen, squatting over a spread of newspaper on the floorboards, dicing onions. I opened my mouth and shut it.

Opened my mouth and shut it. A breath mint danced on my tongue.

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‘How was school, darling?’ Mum wiped her eyes. Onion rings sat like dead skin flakes around her green thongs. The image was so sad it made me want to cry.

‘It was okay.’ I tossed my school bag onto the floor. Deep inside it, folded between algebra textbooks, there was a copy of my signed consent form and invoice.

‘Fresh rau mông at the grocer today: I picked it up for us to make your favourite tomato soup.’

‘Thanks, Mum. Was work busy today?’ I squatted next to her and picked up a knife.

‘A little bit.’ She brought the onion shells and carrot peels to the sink, her shoulders hunching in her pyjamas.

‘Is your back still sore?’ I frowned.

She started inflicting light punches on her lower back, her shoulders pinched.

‘Here.’ I hovered over her, a good two heads taller, and buried my fingers into her knots. She moaned quietly. The overcast light bounced off her pearly skin. ‘Mum?’ I murmured.

‘Yes, darling?’ Her eyelids twitched.

I opened my mouth and shut it. ‘You have so many knots. Let me book you a massage.’

‘Not enough money, sweetheart.’

‘I can start working full time instead of continuing school. I can help you.’

‘No, no, you go to school. You get your big dreams.’

‘But your knots, Mummy.’

‘Mummy fine.’ She rinsed the rau mong leaves in the sink. ‘Now, you still need money to buy that maths textbook? Mum made a hundred dollars today, plus tips.’ She tilted her head towards her brown wallet on the table, the leather tearing like calluses. ‘You take the cash and buy what you need.’

‘I don’t need it, Mum. I can just photocopy Alison’s.’

‘No! You take it now and buy your own copy.’

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‘But Mummy—’

‘I said no.’ Her eyes hardened and when she spoke again, they rimmed with tears. ‘I know you on scholarship, you wear second-hand uniform and train long distance to school. I know we not rich like other girls at school but I earn enough to take care of you. I always have and always will; don’t you make me feel like I can’t.’

My shoulders dropped. ‘Okay, Mummy.’

\*

At night, I quietly pulled the signed consent form and invoice out of my bag. The pamphlets sung to me from their hiding spot, stamped between textbooks. Are we ready? Are we prepared for a new life?

The stars were faint little incisions on the sky’s face. In the bed next to me, gentle snores escaped Mum’s lips. She curled into a foetus shape, facing the wall. Moonlight glinted off her floral silky pyjamas. I didn’t want to wake her, so I clamped my hand over my mouth when I began to weep.

*I understand that all forms of anaesthesia involve risk and the possibility of complications, injury and sometimes death. I understand that there are no guarantees ... that the operation may cause swelling, bruising, scarring, bleeding, nausea and other injuries. Signed, Hannah Le on 9 November 2017.*

Everything Mum earned, she put into my tuition and future. I imagined the conversation I would have with her after returning home from my operation. Mum, it was for my peace and happiness. Mum, I’m sorry, I promise I’ll pay you back for the money I stole. I’m sorry, I promise I’ll take better care of you.

Then, red-eyed and shivering, Mum would say, are you telling me you aren’t already happy?

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Perhaps it was the change in schooling that made me unhappy or maybe it was as simple as growing up, filling my body and not liking it one bit.

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Leading up to my operation, Alison sent me snapchats of her scars. It was on Snapchat for her privacy; she would know if I screenshotted them. I saw the little incisions on her neck and behind her ears.

‘There’s a limit,’ Alison reminded me. ‘Five litres of fat per procedure, which is around three to five kilos. You might need a follow-up procedure if you want to lose more than that.’

We were smoking outside the Jam Factory on Chapel Street, an hour before my shift. My Hungry Jacks name tag glistened on my sweaty uniform.

‘I can barely afford this one.’

There were folded \$100 notes in my pocket, stolen from Mum’s bedside drawer. Guilt made me nervous, so I was always looking over my shoulder, afraid of what karma would do to me.

Alison shrugged, flicking through Instagram. ‘It’s up to you how much you want to invest. Remember your body is your life; you live in it. It’s up to you how much it’s worth.’

My face flushed, hot and angry. ‘It’s not that easy, Alison. I’m not rich like you.’ Alison’s eyes did not lift from her phone.

I abruptly stood. I hated her. I really hated her. ‘I’m leaving.’

I stubbed out my cigarette with my sneakers and headed down the laneway to work, kicking crushed soda cans along the way.

\*

At home, I counted my notes in the dark after Mum started snoring. Exhaustion bricked her body—days stacking fruit were tough on her lower back. I had \$3,050 now, \$1,000 was borrowed from Mum and the remainder was savings from Hungry Jacks. The July breeze

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ruffled our white lace curtains through a gap in the window. The mould on the ceiling stared back at me, muttering karma will hit you like a bitch.

Everything about this room, this house, this city was unfair. I wanted so badly to be happy and I was near it now; the guilt had to be worth it. Mum rolled over in bed, her silky pyjamas crunching like donut glaze. In this position, her soft belly folded out from under her shirt, where I could see the long line from her C-section.

‘Don’t worry,’ I whispered to her dreaming body. ‘I’ll make you happy too.’

\*

‘What did you do?’ Mum stood, a ghost in the hallway, her arms limp by her sides. A stain spread out like chicken feet on the brown carpet at her toes, where I once spilled my soup. I massaged a knot in my upper back and the bandages around my stomach complained, resisting me as I tried to move.

‘A procedure.’

Mum’s eyes bulged. ‘What procedure?’ She was screaming.

I couldn’t meet her eye. ‘Liposuction. I’m sorry.’ My clothes were drooping on me now, growing bigger and bigger.

‘You did what? With MY MONEY? Where is your textbook? Where are your grades?’

The lace curtains wilted, hanging like rumpled spiderwebs in the windows.

I stood slowly, with my arms curled around my abdomen like I was holding a baby. ‘I’ll pay you back. I’ll work right away, I promise.’ The movement sent a sharp zap through my centre and I crumpled back to sitting on the edge of my bed.

‘Why? Why would you do this to me? Do you really think because you study with these rich kids you are one of them? Do you really think now you’ll be happy? That the operation won’t harm you forever?’



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I looked away. Weight had chipped off me like dry skin in the winter. I was born anew, and yet, I was a sixteen-year-old girl in a black swimsuit at the beach, digging her tummy into the sand, re-adjusting her towel across her legs. I was still exposed.

\*

It takes three months at the Little Roaster to save what I spent on my procedure.

I come home, uncurl my scarf and place the cash I withdrew from the bank onto the newspaper on the floor. Mum squats over the newspaper, peeling carrots. Next to the cash, I lay down a pamphlet with a shiny page folded down to mark the pricing table for my procedure.

‘You can use it if you want to,’ I say.

Mum doesn’t look up at me. Thick orange skin falls onto the inky spread. Her bony wrists move slowly, slicing each strip of skin. The wrinkles on her neck bulge as rivers. She doesn’t look at me. White light flows into the kitchen, swamping the sink and benches. Squatting there, Mum looks as though she has been adorned with an angel’s light. I’ve lost her.

Then, a soft voice, almost inaudible among the crickets and the slow roll of cars from the street. ‘When can I do it?’

\*

Mum doesn’t eat much in the days following her procedure. She nibbles on rice, her long, thinning hair resting against her compression garment. Earlier, I wrapped it for her, dabbing away at the fluids that clung to her wounds like snot.

Mum repeated one word. ‘Tighter.’ I wrapped the bandage like a corset. ‘Tighter.’ The moon gleamed.

Now, Mum drops her bowl of rice into the sink. She moves like a ghost. Vietnamese newspapers that once spread across the tiles, for peeling vegetables, are now packed away in

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shelves. The house smells dry like a hospital full of bleach. I tear at my paper napkin, the guilt making me sick.

It was fine when it was just me: me gulping down Ibuprofen; me hugging a hot water bottle to my upset tummy; me visiting the doctor about ongoing pains in my abdomen, losing my period and my hair falling out in clumps. But now, Mum is undertaking this hobby with me and she is not happier, just smaller. Today, she is small; tomorrow, she is a bit smaller and I fear that one day, she'll disappear from me.

'You're so beautiful, Mum ...' I begin, but my words falter. I look to my Mum for resolve but she just looks back at me, her forehead like greasy cling wrap, her life somewhere deep and far behind her eyes.

'I'll go back in four weeks for the second one,' she says calmly.

'The second?' I weep.

'I'm getting fifteen litres removed; I'll be needing three.'

My fingers begin to twitch. 'But ... you're beautiful ...'

'I was beautiful,' Mum sighs, 'but then I had you, and having a child ... your body never quite recovers.' She pauses. 'I was starting to think I may never get back as much I have given.'

Her words slap me in the face, so sharply my eyes water. 'Has that changed?'

She straightens her spine, drawing back her bony shoulders. 'I'm thinner now. I no longer carry the remains of you in my body. But no procedure will fix my heartbreak.'