

Undercover

Flattened, invisible and bloodless. That was how I wanted my chest to feel when playing football with my older brother and two cousins. Underneath my batman shirt were two suction-cup tight Sugarlip tank tops that hid my pointy pubescent boobs, the same way my mom's Spanx hid her bulging lower belly. My mom never talked about bras with me, perhaps because I succeeded in making my body look like it didn't need one.

I was an eleven-year-old girl who smeared on layers of multicolored eye shadow while dancing in front of the mirror to the Lizzie McGuire theme song. I painted my nails a new shade of pink every day after school; my go-to color was Essie's *Ballerina Slippers*. I once went to Chicago with my mom to spend the weekend at the American Girl store where we had tea and went to shows with Samantha the Doll. I didn't talk about this side of me in the summertime when Ryan and I were dropped off at our Ama's house. I packed my bag with shirts that had prints of soccer balls and said things like "Gymnast, Gymnast, Gymnast". I didn't bring my makeup or my nail kit like I would when going to a friend's house; I knew no one would not want to play dress-up.

Instead, we played football. I was on Matthew's team, the oldest paired with the youngest, perhaps as some kind of handicap. I watched as Ryan and Elliot stood on the opposite side of the lawn, whispering strategies.

"Throw or Receive?" Matthew said in our own two person huddle. His height was comforting as I was used to being the tallest one in the whole fourth grade.

"Eh Throwa!" I said in an Italian accent to sound more nonchalant, more natural.

Matthew spread out his palm, moving his finger in different directions. I nodded my head, wishing I was a reality TV star so that back home Julie or Penelope could watch in amazement at how sporty I seemed.

“Hey look at that!” Our grandma cheered from the driveway. She had on her blue gardening clogs and the safari hat my dad had won at an arcade last summer. Before we went outside, Ama checked in with me (as she did every time), reminding me that I didn’t have to play football or tag, I didn’t have to ride my bike through the muddy trails. “You can always stay with Ama and make shrimp chips!”

I imagined myself trapped inside Ama’s kitchen, listening to her life philosophies preached over the tune of crackling oil. She would talk about her bound feet and her dislike of Greek yogurt. She would try to teach me Mandarin and I would try to be respectful. Meanwhile the boys would be running around, forming new jokes and new games that I wouldn’t be a part of or understand. They would toss the football and not think to wonder where I had gone because Matthew would invite his friend Tim so they could switch up the teams and not need to worry about a handicap.

“Set, hike!” Matthew yelled as he tossed me the ball. He sprinted to the end zone with Ryan at his tail.

“One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi...”

Elliot burst toward me. I heard Matthew’s voice in the distance pressing me to throw the ball already. I gripped the leather laces with all five fingers and hurled my body forward. I smiled as it spiraled through the air.

That night we slept over at Matthew and Elliot’s house.

“You sure you don’t want to sleep here with Ama?” Ama asked me as we packed up the GameCube and coiled the remote controls. We had turned our grandma’s living room into a man cave – video games sprawled on the ground, popcorn in the crevices of her couch.

I nodded, there was no way I would miss the sleepover, the night we shared our school drama and listened to *alternative* music. I ran to catch up with the boys who were on their bikes circling the driveway. I mounted my own bike, heaving a pink printed tote bag over my shoulder.

Portraits of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, with their bald heads and determined smiles, stared at me as I laid on the floor in a sleeping bag. I was younger than Matthew by four years, Ryan three, and Elliot two. Since Ryan and I lived in New York City and our cousins in Northampton, Massachusetts, we used our annual summer sleepovers (*not* slumber parties as Elliot pointed out) to catch up on the latest news of who likes who, whose friends are still their friends, and all the juicy school drama in our respective grades. It was the only time I got to hear from my brother about what was happening in his life. Normally during the school week he would come home late then go straight to the office to play video games, in which I was never invited. There was one time this year that I went to the bathroom in our foyer, and all along the bamboo wallpaper were crazed streaks of sharpie marker. It looked like the horror version of *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. Neither mom nor dad acknowledged the graffiti in the bathroom. It remained unspoken mystery I had to figure out for myself.

“So, Ryan, who are you into now a days?” Matthew asked from the bottom of the bunk bed.

“Uhh. There’s this one girl. Jordan Gorgonzola something. I think I like her at least.” Elliot and Matthew burst into a fit of laughter.

“What’s so funny?” I wanted to get in on the joke too.

“Her last name is *Gorgonzola*! How whack is that?” Elliot said, probably wiping tears off his face by now.

“Oooh. Ha!” I puffed out a chuckle.

“Do you know what that is?” said Matthew.

“Yeah of course!” I continued, hoping the question was resolved. It took me three years of fake laughing to figure out that Gorgonzola was a type of cheese and that the sharpie written on the wall was from my brother.

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“Ama is going to pick the blueberries in the garden. You can eat all the blueberries you want – how ‘bout that?”

All four of us were putting on our shoes to go outside, but Ama directed the question at me.

“We’re going to play football Ama,” Elliot said before I could respond myself. I nodded my head in agreement, smiling to myself, *we’re going to play football*.

“Set, hike!” I yelled as I tossed the ball between my legs.

This year, three Sugarlip tank tops worked to conceal the persistent growing mounds on my chest. When Julie had asked me if it was uncomfortable to wear so many layers, I could only look at her perfectly flat body like the rest of the girls in the sixth grade, and say no.

I ran to the other side of the lawn, making zigzags in order to lose Elliot who swiftly followed my every move. I turned around to look for Matthew or the ball but Elliot's shaved head blocked my view. Somewhere in the process of this I ran into Ama's mailbox. The game paused as I hopelessly watched the ball fly over my head and bounce off the grass.

"Are you okay?" Ryan asked from a distance, remaining at a distance.

I worked my way to stand then brushed the dirt from my butt. My ankle was throbbing.

"Yep," I tried to say convincingly. I joined Matthew in our two person huddle to go over the next play.

We sat at the dinner table. Ryan and Matthew were talking about something related to physics that I didn't understand. I kept my gaze toward my plate as I chewed.

Ama, you were right. I should have picked blueberries instead. Ama my ankle is the size of a tennis ball, do you have any ice?

Ama, can you pass the soy sauce?" I mumbled, too scared to make eye contact.

"You know, you can sleep here with Ama. Who needs those boys?" She reminded me as we packed to go over to Matthew and Elliot's for the night.

I thought about the pulse beating inside my foot and the crushing pain each step I took trying not to limp. Then I thought about the sleepover and the Gorgonzola jokes and the other secrets my brother would freely share.

"That's okay Ama, I'll be fine." I slowly mounted my bike then followed almost two house lengths behind everyone. Occasionally Matthew stopped and waited, which forced me to bike with my head down so he wouldn't see me cry.

“So, Allison, what’s new with you?” Matthew asked after we had heard from Ryan about his finally being over Gorgonzola and leaning toward this girl named Jean who was on his robotics team. I remembered how he had this one girl over at our house, with short hair and chipmunk-ish cheeks. Apparently, that was Jean.

I didn’t know what to say.

Middle school is fun, but that’s nothing new to any of you.

I don’t like anyone, and I’m not planning on liking anyone because Ryan you still seem sad that Gorgonzola never said yes to lunch and I don’t want that to be me.

I broke my newly painted nail and possibly my ankle playing football today, but a complainer was someone like Catherine Hayes who cried so much the teachers stopped responding.

“Eh. Nothing much,” I said.

I wanted to roll over and face the wall but my ankle wouldn’t let me.

Later in the evening, when I could hear the heavy breaths of Elliot on the floor next to me, I crept downstairs to lie on the couch because I couldn’t sleep with my balloon sized foot. When my Aunt Wellie found me, lying with my eyes open, the sun barely risen, she gave me some medicine and one of her old Aircasts.

“I’m going to call your parents to let them know about this,” she assured me.

I didn’t find out I fractured my ankle until six months later when I went to the doctor because it was still swollen. I still revel in the guilt that it caused my parents.

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We played football until the smell of Ama's pork dumplings lured us back to the house. I sprinted to the bathroom first, praying the platter wouldn't be empty by the time I returned. I sat on the toilet, watching a daddy longlegs hang out in a cobweb by the tub. Apparently it was good luck to pluck their legs off, or at least that was what Ryan told me once. My gaze shifted from the spider to the underwear caught between my knees and a little splotch of reddish brown tainted in the center. *Fuck* I whispered as I unrolled a wad of toilet paper in a panic. I was going into eighth grade wearing a B size bra and thought it a blessing I wouldn't have to suffer through a period too. I hiked up my pants and rushed over to my grandma's bathroom in the hopes of finding some form of padding. However it didn't take me long to remember Ama was eighty and part of the same Menopause club my mom insisted on telling us about one night at dinner.

I assured myself it could be a false alarm, maybe my body would discover it could wait until I was not living with my brother, two male cousins and menopausal grandma to become more womanly. I wrapped some toilet paper around my underwear as a resolution and decided to ignore it. As far as I knew, I was the same person as I was an hour ago. I jogged to the kitchen for some dumplings.

That night when we slept over at Matthew and Elliot's, I stole a tampon from the cabinet below my aunt's sink and tucked it in my tote bag for safe keeping. Samantha Morris got her period when she was on the school nature field trip. She had to get a pad from Mrs. Diaz and the whole class, even the boy's side knew about it. Julie told me when she got her period she told her mom and they went out for a "Ladies Dinner" in order to celebrate.

“What about *you* Allison? Anything new?” Elliot asked.

“Um. I think I am going to try out for the volleyball team this year.” I clenched my legs together so that no blood would seep out.