



Commendable

by Whitney Call

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Lani's lips were fat because Lani was fat. She didn't want to dance because it was hard to move when her body was so fat. Sometimes we had to get up and dance and she sat by the window and bobbed her head from side to side.

I had to dance because it wasn't physically harmful to raise my heart rate above 120 BPM. Lani said she could die if her heart rate even hit 121, she even had a doctor's note, but I think she was lying. I didn't want to dance because I was wearing shorts that day and my legs were so stubby, I looked ridiculous. I couldn't stop watching my calves bang into each other while I danced. The instructor told us to explore the space but I didn't want to explore the space with my legs banging into each other. Not to mention Jared wouldn't stop staring at me.

I tiptoed over to the window because I knew Jared was staring at my legs and I explored the space around Lani. Lani bent over so her cleavage reached all the way up to her chin. She could drown in those breasts, gurgling for breath in huge waves of her pink flesh.

The dance instructor mentioned we could take our shoes off if we wanted, but I left mine on. The carpet was soft, I knew, but my toes were long with hair on them because they didn't let us keep razors in here. Some people used the razors to cut themselves. Lani cut her wrists the month before, but she did it with a plastic knife from the cafeteria. The blood dripped off her bed and onto the girl next to her. That girl woke up screaming and our room supervisor took Lani to the emergency room without even blinking because another girl had cut the week before that. Everyone went back to sleep when Lani left for the hospital, even the girl with blood on her, but I couldn't sleep because I wondered if any of Lani's blood had gotten on my bed.

Most dance studios have mirrors facing us, but this wasn't a dance studio. It was an office with the blinds closed and even if the blinds were opened, the windows were non-reflective because they didn't allow mirrors here. We all had to tell each other we were beautiful every morning and they expected that to be good enough, even though all of us were lying. Even the toilet bowls had very little water in them so we couldn't open our legs and see ourselves while taking a piss.

I flipped Jared off because he was still staring at me so he looked away, but then the dance hour was over. Lani stood up and told me, You looked good out there, Muffy. Lani made her lips stay tight and still when she spoke because they were big and when Lani's mouth moved, her whole face jiggled. She didn't want her face to jiggle. Lani always stared at my face and it bugged the hell out of me so I'd say, Lani, either look at my eyes or don't look at all. Lani's the kind of person who stared, though. About half the people here stared for much too long because when someone stops looking at you, you're not supposed to keep looking at them for no damn reason.

In groups we had to talk to Dr. Beuren. Dr. Beuren had shiny blonde hair

that I wanted to rip right off of her scalp. She had a long, thin nose that looked exotic and beautiful. She asked us to go around and say where we wanted to be in five years. Jared said he wanted to go back to medical school, but Jared will never go back to medical school. He weighed less than me and he was six feet tall. When he talked, he folded his arms and stared at me but I stared at his arms because the skin stretched so tight across his elbow, it looked like it might rip. I think if Jared's elbows ripped open, there'd only be chalky bones underneath.

Every room we met in had olive carpet and beige walls. It looked like my sister's house because my sister loved using bamboo in every room. She had bamboo mats and vases with bamboo stalks and then she covered the furniture with beige because that went well with bamboo. She would've given me bamboo to take here if she knew the office rooms matched her house.

When Dr. Beuren asked, What goals do you want to achieve in five years, Muffy, I said I wanted to stop having my shit weighed. Everyone laughed except Dr. Beuren. A nutritionist watched us eat and a proctologist watched us squat and take a crap. I told them all the time—I'm not anorexic. They knew, they said, but they still had to do it.

Dr. Beuren ran her fingers through her shiny blonde hair and said that wasn't what she meant, and I told her I knew what she meant. Dr. Beuren knew I wasn't an idiot like Lani, so when I wanted her to take me seriously, I used better diction. I told her that I was alluding to a bigger picture because none of us were commendable people and I didn't want us to act more important than we were. We all just wanted to leave. Jared stared at me while I talked to Dr. Beuren, and Dr. Beuren's exotic nose was beautiful so I looked at the olive carpet and thought about my sister's house and all the bamboo because the office room was ugly and my nose was not thin and beautiful and Jared would not stop staring at it. Dr. Beuren said, Muffy, you'll see me after lunch. And I felt like I was back in grade school, even though we're all old and ugly.

We had to draw ourselves. Dr. Beuren wanted us to draw a picture of ourselves and we'd all talk about them after. I've had to draw lots of pictures of myself because people thought I was crazy, but I'm a good drawer and they told me the pictures were good. Dr. Beuren never told me my pictures were good, but I knew she liked them, even if she thought I was crazy. If I drew pictures of Dr. Beuren and Jared and Lani and everyone in my group, no one would say I was crazy because they're not me and when I drew pictures of myself, I was crazy.

Lani sat next to me at lunch and asked, Did you know Marilyn Monroe was a size fourteen, while she ate a bowl of clam chowder that she took from the girl next to her. We weren't supposed to share food, but sometimes Lani snuck it and most of the girls let her because they didn't want to get fat and Lani didn't care.

I stared at my bread bowl because Lani was staring at me. I told her that in the fifties, though, being a fourteen is like being a six, and Lani didn't say anything. Besides, most of it was her boobs. I've read in articles that she'd be a 30E today.

Lani coughed, wiping cream from her mouth. I looked at her eyes, but they

were tiny and covered by the extra skin on her eyelids. Sometimes I wondered how far Lani's eyelid skin would stretch if I pulled it off her face.

Come on, I said, look at Marilyn Monroe. She obviously wasn't fat.

Lani nodded, looking down at her food. She said that people always used to talk to her about Marilyn Monroe, and then she shook her head and looked back at me so I looked down at my food. Lani laughed and said, It's stupid though. Of course she wasn't fat.

30E isn't fat. It's lucky. I was barely an A, except my boobs were disproportionate. Once in middle school, I went to a water park with my cousins but I forgot my swimsuit so my cousins said, Just wear your shorts and pretend you're a boy, so I did. Nobody thought twice when they saw me except my cousin, Brian. He kept staring at me and I didn't know if it was because I was shirtless or flat, but I hoped it was because I was shirtless since that would mean I didn't look like a boy.

Beautiful people are shaped like hourglasses and their faces are symmetrical. Marilyn Monroe had a symmetrical face because she had plastic surgery. Her body curved in the right places for society to call her attractive because an hourglass makes sense. Lani was shaped like a big, lumpy apple, so she would never look like Marilyn Monroe. Lani was crazy.

After lunch, Dr. Beuren wanted to see me and my drawing. Her office was smaller than the office rooms we met in for dance and groups and art and music and visiting. Her floor was still olive, but her desk was dark brown and she had a cactus on the shelf near her head and that didn't quite match the carpet. I wondered if the cactus ever fell off the shelf and stabbed Dr. Beuren's scalp because it was in the perfect position to land upside down and slice her head open. The blood would've blended in with the desk because it was so dark that the desk almost looked like blood anyway. There might've been blood on the desk that I couldn't see.

Dr. Beuren thought I was crazy. She asked why I drew myself that way and I didn't know what to say because I could draw well and if I drew Dr. Beuren's long, exotic nose, she'd tell me it was a good picture.

The cactus didn't look as good in the room as bamboo would have and I told Dr. Beuren that. My sister had a clean house, even though she had three children, and everything matched and I liked that.

Dr. Beuren wanted me to talk about my sister more, so I told her that my sister had a husband who was a chiropractor and he made lots of money and never got sued, but I still wouldn't let him adjust my neck or back.

What was she like as a kid? I told Dr. Beuren that my sister was quiet, because she was. She said three swears at a birthday party once and I heard her, so I told her I wouldn't tell our mom if she promised to be my servant. I made her clean my room and make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches toasted because they're better toasted than not. I made her push at the pressure points on her neck until she went unconscious because my friends were trying to make themselves pass out. She was a good servant until she heard me swear and then she said she wasn't going to help me anymore, but I was bored anyway.

I want to leave.

We're not finished.

I want to leave this whole damn place.

You can't until you're better.

I am better.

Not your best.

I'm not crazy.

That's what I said to Dr. Beuren, but she made me keep talking. My drawing sat on her desk and I could see it look back at me. Dr. Beuren made me keep talking.

My sister lied to my parents when I skipped school because she knew I didn't want to go. She told them I'd eaten lunch with her and they liked that because they thought I was such a good big sister.

Why weren't you at school?

I was under my bed. I was too scared to leave the house.

Why were you scared?

I picked and I knew everyone saw it and they didn't even try to look at my eyes.

Do you only look at people's eyes when you talk to them?

Only if they're ugly.

Why?

Because I know they feel stupid.

Dr. Beuren rubbed her face and I thought of all the germs on her hands that touched her face and clogged her skin with bacteria and bacterial shit. I never touched my face. Dr. Beuren didn't have any bacterial shit in her skin, though, because her skin was clear and her nose was thin and her hair was shiny and beautiful and she watched me, so I looked back at her desk. I told her, Dr. Beuren, if you're going to stare at me, look at my eyes or don't look at me at all. And then Dr. Beuren said I could go, but she wouldn't let me take my picture with me.

When I got back to my room, Lani was waiting on her bed and I didn't want to talk to Lani so I sat on my bed facing the window. The beds in our rooms were thin and I could feel the springs in my mattress twirl upward and poke me through the fabric. My sheets had been washed that morning and I liked feeling the blanket on my palm because I knew it was clean and it smelled better than it had the night before.

Lani stood up behind me. I could hear her bed squeak when she got up because it took her a long time. Her footsteps walked over to me and I hoped she wouldn't sit down, but she did, so I bit my tongue because my blanket wasn't as clean as it was a moment ago.

I could feel Lani staring at me, but I kept feeling the blanket. I wanted to take Lani's fat eyelids and stretch them until they ripped off her brow bones. I wanted to dig my nails into her cheeks and pull back so that her skin would peel off like wallpaper and there'd just be pink and yellow fat beneath her skin because she was sitting on my bed and it wasn't as clean as it was before. Lani held out a rice krispie treat and said, I saved you a piece. I know you like them.

Lani gave me rice krispie treats every time I had to see Dr. Beuren, like she felt bad for me, but Lani didn't need to feel bad for me. I wished she'd learn how to stop eating so much so she could leave. She just had to eat less. She knew she had to eat less. I didn't know how to get out because my drawings made everyone think I was crazy. I took the rice krispie and tossed it on my bed.

Then Lani said, I found this, too. And Lani's voice was quieter, so I looked up. She had a small compact in her chubby palm.

I gasped and asked her where she got it. I took the mirror out of Lani's hand and opened it, feeling the plastic clasp click through my fingers. Lani's voice hummed in my ears, but I didn't listen to her because I had a mirror in my hands. The mirror was small, but it was still a mirror. I almost cried, I couldn't believe it.

The fluorescent lights reflected off the mirror and hit my eyes. I'd forgotten that mirrors made lights bounce off the ceiling when you positioned them the right way. I squinted and tilted the mirror back until I saw my neck and I stopped because my neck was so bony. I looked back at Lani because she was staring at me.

Go away, Lani. I'll give this back later.

I looked back at my neck, but Lani didn't move for a moment, so I stared at her tennis shoes and all the ankle spilling over them. Then I heard her grunt as she pushed herself off the bed. She stood up and said, I thought you'd like it.

Thank you. Go away, Lani.

The door to the room closed and I looked up to make sure Lani was gone. Nobody was in the room but me and I knew I wouldn't have a lot of time to look because they didn't let us be alone for very long. My hand shook and I tried to keep it still, but I hadn't seen my face in months and I didn't want to be crazy. My chin jutted into the frame and it was pointier than I remembered, like a witch's chin. My lips were thin and colorless and I didn't have any lipstick. They didn't let us keep lipstick here because they didn't let us have any makeup. We were supposed to tell each other how beautiful we looked every day. Nobody ever told me that my lips looked full and beautiful. They must have thought I had no lips like a burn victim. If I'd ripped my lips right off my face, no one would have noticed a difference unless the scars were redder than my own lips. Maybe I'd look better with scars for lips. I

forgot how huge and bulbous my nose was. It was covered in scars because I picked. I couldn't understand why Dr. Beuren thought I was crazy when she saw my nose every day. It looked like Santa Claus in a horror movie, but Santa Claus is a boy and girls never look beautiful with bulbous noses. Every pore in my nose was black and filled with bacterial shit. I had to clean the pores on my nose because they were full and black, so I set the mirror on the windowsill, but it almost dropped because my hands were shaking. Everybody here lied to me because they pretended I looked normal to make me believe I was crazy. I am not crazy. I have never been crazy because I could see all the bacterial shit in my nose right there in the mirror. And there were pimples on my cheek, but when I'd tried to say that to Dr. Beuren, she told me I was crazy. I picked at a pimple and it bled, crawling out into a bloody puddle, but I had to dig everything out because pimples are caused by a buildup of dirt and the digested shit that passes through bacteria. My skin was full of germs and dirt and oil and nobody told me and instead they said I was crazy. I picked at another pimple and my fingernails were red but I had to get my face clean. I couldn't leave anything in my skin. I had to get it out.

Everyone here was lying to me. I picked deeper and deeper into my skin and I almost laughed because I couldn't believe how much shit I dug out. It was disgusting and it was all there in my fingernails. I could see it and feel it and it was all right there.

When the door opened, I scraped my face with all my fingernails to get everything out. I had to get as much out as I could before they took the mirror away. I scratched at the bumps on my skin and picked at my nose. I had to even out my nose. My nails scraped into my big nose and all of the black dots to make it all even, all even and clean.

The mirror snapped shut so I screamed because I couldn't see my face. A pair of arms slipped under mine and pulled me up, but I couldn't see my face. I kicked against the wall and shoved my head into the person holding me up so they screamed and let me go. They had my mirror and I had to get everything out because I wasn't done but I couldn't see my face and I couldn't pick if I couldn't see my face.

Dr. Beuren said shh shh shh. I couldn't see my face. I tasted blood in my mouth. I couldn't see my face. I closed my eyes. My face was cleaner now. It was cleaner than before and I liked that.

There were bandages all over my face but I still had to go to group session today. I looked at the olive floor while Lani talked because she stared at me. I looked at the floor because there were bandages on my face. When I talked, I felt my bandages stretch across my skin.

We were supposed to write letters, but I didn't know who to write to because everyone thought I was crazy. I felt a pen poke my arm and it was Lani. Her fat hand covered her letter and then she moved her hand to show me what she wrote on the paper.

I'm sorry I got you in trouble. That's what she wrote on the paper. I turned away and looked back at my empty paper because I had bandages on my face and I felt more stupid than normal because when someone has bandages on their face, they look like they're crazy.

When we walked to lunch, Lani walked next to me and I felt her looking at me so I stopped walking and Lani stopped too. I said, Lani, why the hell do you always stare at me? I know. It's disgusting.

Lani's huge lips barely moved when she said, I think you have the prettiest eyes, Muffy, and I just blinked because I didn't expect Lani to say that.

I kept walking, so Lani did too and she patted me on the back, which I didn't like, and I told her that complimenting your eyes is how ugly people flatter each other. She stopped patting me and she stopped staring at my face.

The spoons in the cafeteria were plastic, so you couldn't really see yourself in the bowl of the spoon. I tried, but I couldn't see anything except the silhouette of my bandages jutting out from the sides of my face. I never got to see my eyes in that tiny mirror Lani gave me.

Lani poured a pool of gravy into her mashed potatoes and stared at her plate. Then she turned to me, but she still didn't look at me, and she said, I want to get out of here, Muffy, and I said, Everyone does.

Jared sat down at a table across from us and he wouldn't stop looking at me, but I flipped him off so he looked down at his food instead. Lani laughed, but I could tell she was staring at me again, too, and I told her to stop. Then she leaned the top half of her big belly over our table and asked another girl, Are you going to eat your roll, and the girl said no because she was anorexic, so Lani took it from her. Lani spread some butter on the roll and was about to eat it, but I grabbed it out of her hand and said, No, Lani. You're too fat to take other people's food.

Lani stared at her mashed potatoes and the anorexic girl looked me so I said, What, and she looked away. I put her buttered roll back on her plate and told Lani to hurry up because we had to go to dance class. After a moment, Lani nodded and said, I can dance, today.

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