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ORIGINAL BRA

Meredith Resnick

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I get my first bra when I am thirteen, even though I think of what I have as a chest, not breasts. I don't want a bra, whether I need one or not. But I soon find out that doesn't matter.

My new breasts attract attention. Breasts in general are a topic of conversation for girls and boys. Girls talk about busts and bras and curves and exercises that make tiny endowments swell to prize proportions. Boys talk about laying hands on endowments—the bigger, the better. I eavesdrop on these conversations, linger on the outskirts. I'm curious but I do not wear a bra and do not acknowledge I need one, so I have no right to talk. That is fine with me.

My aunt, my mother's sister, wants me to discuss my breasts and how they grow month by month, but she does all the talking. She thinks this will help me get over my shyness about my breasts. But I'm not shy; I'm private. Especially when she points at my breasts like they're ripe tomatoes ready for picking and declares, "Look at how you're blooming; you're a real bloomer!"

It doesn't help when she lifts her hands, palms up in front of her like she's hefting two bowling balls, and waddles around in circles sing-singing every word she knows for breasts. But she does it anyway.

The hardest part is when she takes my mother by the elbow and sighs, "Your baby is growing bosoms; you will have to take her brassiere shopping soon."

My mother grows tense. My aunt grins and stares. If I leave the room, they know I am upset and will talk about me behind my back. That is the worst.

The best I can do is slouch my shoulders forward and cross my arms. Without missing a beat, my mother tells me to stop hiding myself and stand up straight. She has told me this before. But when I comply, I feel her eyes on me, as though she is looking at a stranger. I want to hide.

I hate the word brassiere. It is a grown-up word; it sounds sexy and sexy is grown up. Sometimes I feel sexy and it scares me because I feel like someone else. I feel something I don't understand well up inside me. But then I look in the mirror at my skinny arms and long neck. Sexy is beautiful. I'm not.

My mother has a love-hate relationship with beauty. She describes her own body in a way that is at once concealed and repulsed. "I have gorgeous calves," she says, posing as a model would for Chanel, or pointing her toe like a drum majorette. She peeks in the full-length mirror, lifting her chin ever so slightly, then wilts. "Too bad my thighs look like meat

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My father also has the habit of commenting on all the pretty women who walk by and, as a child, I thought when she talked about my father's wandering eye she meant an eye that went for a stroll. My mother had begun seeing a psychiatrist, a man, to whom she complained about my father. He told my mother she should point out to her husband all the pretty ladies, the ones she'd think he'd find attractive before he could point them out to her. She explained the idea was of the head-'em-off-at-the-pass variety, the I-saw-it-first genre. If my mother could identify the ladies my father might like and say them aloud first, including what was pretty about them and how she might want the same attributes, she would avoid the humiliation of being caught off-guard.

But now the problem is me, not the ladies on the street whom my mother thinks are prettier than she is. I fight to change her mind but end up crying. Her words hurt. Sometimes I think she doesn't want me to grow up. Like when I wear pantyhose with my dresses instead of knee socks. When I don't wear my hair in two long braids anymore, or forget to wear a robe with my nightgown. Like the times when my father looks at me like I am not a little girl anymore and my mother sees him looking. I am still his little girl, but I am less little and girl now. I am thirteen, a young lady, and I am sensitive, not only to the words boys my age say about a girl's breasts, but about what I imagine men my father's age might say, and not always with actual words, but with a turn of the head, a stare held a moment too long.

If she could keep me a girl, keep me someone who fathers and brothers and boys don't look at, maybe that will make her happy. If I don't wear a bra, I defy my body. I want to make my body agree with what I think she wants. At thirteen, I think she wants this because she never suggests we go bra shopping.

Instead my mother and I argue, and I cry. My father is the one who soothes my hurt with a gentle voice, a funny joke. My mother sometimes

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gets mad when he does this. She never used to, but now she feels like we are against her. My father's words were always a neutral area; now they are a war zone. I wish I could talk to my mother about it, but she turns my words against me. My emotions upset her. Emotion upsets her.



The girls in fourth-period P.E. don't understand why I don't wear a bra.

They say something like, "Does the word *bra* mean anything to you?"

They say flat-out, "Girls who attend Foothills Junior High School in Arcadia, California, wear bras."

They tell me because I just moved from New York. They think in New York everyone burned their bras so no one wears any.

The girls say, "We saw your upstairs private parts because you don't wear a bra."

They were behind me during squat thrusts and push-ups and could see up my gym shirt when it billowed away from my body. The girls pat me on the back and assure me they weren't trying to look, that they tried hard not to look, and that even though they saw it all, they weren't staring. Then one of them giggles.

Didn't your mother take you bra shopping when you started junior high? they question. I shake my head because I cannot make words come out of my mouth.

One of the girls wags a finger at me and says, "Well tell your mother we all have the same bras and you get them at JCPenney."

The five nod in approval. One unsnaps her gym blouse as we shuffle back to the locker room. She faces me, holds her white blouse open with her fingertips, turns her torso left then right like a model so I see all angles of the JC Penney bra. It is dainty like a lace doily and white like

milk. The cups are filled with something that makes her tiny breasts look like two golf balls stuck to her chest. The bra has a teensy pink rosette on the bodice and, she points out, the bra straps adjust.

The word *bra* sounds better to me than *brassiere* does. I watch her snap up her blouse and say, "But do I really need one?"

"Everyone needs one in junior high!" they chime. It doesn't matter what you look like. They tell me it's not about how big I am, it's about what grade I'm in. We're not kids, they say. We all wear them and if you don't, the boys think you're easy.

One adds, "That's the only reason the boys talk to you."

I feel naked and stupid and cannot hide anymore. What I've tried to keep secret is no secret. I hope the boys across the blacktop can't see through my shirt. I cross my arms, curl my shoulders, and go to my locker. I put my street clothes back on. I wear a sweater over my blouse the rest of the day. Even though it is eighty-five degrees outside, I button it.



Later I tell my mother the bra story. She braces herself against the white Formica countertop in my sister's kitchen, where we are staying since we moved from New York. My mother's face is the color of snow. It makes her nervous, this bra talk. My aunt should be here to tell her it's brassiere shopping time.

All my mother says is, "You never wanted a bra before; you never asked."

For the first time I wonder why she never asked me, told me, that I needed one. Her voice sounds blaming, but I shed no tears. It doesn't matter. I have to get a bra. I can't help the way I look or that I am looked at. Still, she does not say when we will go bra shopping.

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My older sister wants to help but she doesn't take me bra shopping; that is something a mother does. My sister could be my mother; she is twenty-one years older than I am. She tells me that she doesn't remember our mother taking her bra shopping either, and she seems at once annoyed and resigned that the chore to outfit me in my first bra has fallen to her.

My sister stands by the window in her dressing room and the warm autumn winds pull the sheer curtains flat against the open frame. She extends her hand and in it, bunched up in a wad no bigger than a plum is my first bra. The straps are scrambled between her fingers and the fine mesh cups rest in her palm.

Here, wear this, she says. I don't wear it anymore.

She lets the bra slip from her hand. One strap loops around her index finger and the bra dangles in midair. Here, try it, she says extending her arm.

This is my first bra. It is the color of sand. Playground sand from a sandbox. A yellow brown. Next to my skin it looks the color of uncooked oatmeal. Pasty. Its tiny cups are frayed and snags dot the material. It is soft.

I go to my bedroom and close the door. I sit cross-legged on the bed and place my first bra in front of me. I stick my gym socks in the cups to see how it looks filled up. I decide not to try the bra on, but know the time has come to wear it, even if it isn't from JCPenney.

I think only of the girls in fourth-period P.E. with their crisp white bras with tiny rosettes, with fuzzy layers of padding that fill space where nothing else does. My bra has no filling, no roses, and it is see-through. It had been used and it looks like something a woman wears, not a thirteen-year-old. But I will wear it anyway.

My mother stays out of my room and doesn't ask about my new bra. She doesn't ask if I want to go bra shopping because why shop? I have a bra now. If I want to buy a bra, I will have to go myself.

Years later I will shop for my own bras. Sometimes I will stand in the dressing room with the distinct feeling I am doing something wrong because I am doing something that acknowledges my femininity. I will overcome my shyness and buy bras meant to be removed by men; I will look for the laciest, most seductive, prettiest piece of lingerie I can find, then buy two. I will practice looking at myself, examining my body, then getting dressed because I've read this will help me be more comfortable with myself. And I will learn, through the sheer practice of standing up straight in hundreds of dressing rooms before even more full-length mirrors, that all the confused feelings I felt at thirteen—wanting to hide myself yet be acknowledged—still live in me, that it's normal. That for my mother, it never felt normal.



I will know all this because I will not be that little girl anymore.

WHAT *Meredith* HOPES READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM HER STORY

"I hope readers will be inspired to write, draw, paint, sing, diagram, or in some way document their own story."