

Careful What You Wish For

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She was my alter-ego. I always thought so. Something to do with her name and mine, almost the same. If my name were Eliza, she'd be Elisa, and if I were Katie she'd be Kathy. And we dated all the same men and took all the same courses in college. She sat across from me in a thesis seminar and never said a word. I was laughing and always too loud and she was silent. Pale and drawn, I imagined she turned that pallid color from the hours she spent in the library. I don't know if she spent hours in the library because I was never there to see, but I imagined she did, a disciplined, scholarly intellect. Quiet, thin, and pale. Her name so like mine.

So it's something like ten years later, I'm coming from a directing class and I run into her in another library. And I'm looking at what she's wearing, a fourteen-year-old's outfit. And I'm thinking shit, she's so thin, she can get away with wearing a fourteen-year-old's outfit. Old Levi's and one of those t-shirts that don't quite cover your belly. Or what would have been a belly on me. Old Levi's and hiking boots. And something about the way she was standing, the way her feet were turned out and her jeans were gathered around her ankles at the top of her boots, reminded me of a cartoon character. Something drawn in a comic strip. And I was looking to see if you could see the top of her underwear at the waistband of her jeans. And I think you could, a simple lace waistband, and I wondered if it was weird, or if someone passed by, if they would think it weird, a woman staring at the waistband of another woman's jeans. But I wanted to know. Something about whether that was cool, or appropriate even. Being almost thirty and letting your underwear show above your jeans. But the lace was so barely visible that I wondered if she even knew you could see it. If she didn't, well then, I couldn't learn anything anyway.

And she was talking to someone, and twisting her arm, flexing at the elbow, in and out, flexing and twisting and you could see the muscle in her upper arm press against her skin, jumping and sliding up and down. Not any fat on her. In that tight little t-shirt. And I wondered if she had sad little breasts, or nice ones, and if they would look better with a Wonderbra on like my friend Amy wears. Or if a Wonderbra wouldn't suit her sort of hippy-cas style. And I wonder if Amy is even still wearing a Wonderbra these days because she says her breasts grew and I have no reason to believe they haven't. Mine have. Grew and sagged. There was a time, when I was fourteen or fifteen I guess, when I couldn't buy a bathing suit because my breasts just popped out over the top of them. Up at my chin, my mother would say. Now when I get out of the shower, I lift them up, one by one, to dry off underneath them. Like my mother's breasts when I was young. Young enough that I wanted breasts like hers, too young to know I didn't. Large pendulous beasts, my mother told me her doctor said. Like it was a diagnosis, a

clinical term, large pendulous breasts. Now my mother only has two uneven scars, gashes, slashes, patched up hastily where breasts once were.

Anyway, Eliza or Kathy was telling me she was writing screenplays now, and did I know her friend she was writing with? He went to school with us too, and no, he wasn't her boyfriend, and she had this deal to write a script and was supposed to go to England to meet the director. Yeah, a deal with Dreamworks, whatever. Yeah, whatever. And I'm thinking Amy's father, Amy of the Wonderbras, her father's a producer at Dreamworks.

And no, no, she isn't working on her dissertation anymore. Screenplays. But she's not sure, about film and stuff I mean, maybe it's not her medium and all, and she wouldn't mind if the deal fell through because she's really not in the place to write that kind of thing right now anyway. She'd like to go off to Berlin to live for awhile. Yeah, I wish I were in a place I could just go off somewhere for awhile. And now I was aware of a clogged feeling in my ears, like a head cold, like I was underwater and couldn't really hear her, talking quietly in the library. And I was feeling awkward because I wasn't really feeling well. Yeah, I wish I could just go off and hang out for awhile somewhere else. Well, when you get out of a mental hospital, she said, when you get out of a mental hospital, you can sort of do whatever you want.

And she took my phone number and I thought maybe we would have coffee sometime and talk about screenplays and nervous breakdowns, but I also kind of knew we wouldn't. And the thing was, when I left the library, my head kind of clogged with a head cold and allergies, I was envious. What does it take to get into a mental hospital these days? How bad does one get? Or do you just need connections? I know many people now who've been in. A dubious distinction, friend of afflicted, but I imagined it has something to do with friend of the fabulously smart. A mad genius. And I don't really know if she, Kathy or Eliza, is a genius or if she is mad, but I imagine somehow she must be both. Like the others I know. Brief interludes in psych wards, and much more successful than I. Creative genius, mad creative genius. And if I muddle through, with mere bouts of depression, a teary episode, a short binge of chocolate and Diet Coke, will I get the screenplay deal, sell the first novel and second? Be pallid and drawn and thin enough to wear my t-shirt short and my underwear showing? Or will I muddle through with bouts of depression, and minor successes, laughing and loud with my trousers belted and pressed?