

Layer By Layer

On the dresser sat a wooden framed baby photo, and in the mirror was Lane's new face. One much happier than the other.

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When she was seven years old, Lane fell off the side of a metal slide. She scraped her face and fractured her forearm in two places. The cast Lane wore was purple and full of signatures and scribbles from classmates. The thick, plaster casing made her arm hot and sweaty and she would spend most of the class with a ruler up in it, trying to soothe the constant itch without hitting the lines of stitches. It was the most attention Lane had ever received. And she fed on it like a newborn animal.

Lane's parents hadn't been the ones to take her to the hospital. They only came after the nurse called several times and left multiple persistent messages. It was her mom who eventually showed up, signing the forms without saying a word to Lane. The whole afternoon Lane had been doted upon by nurses and they gave her a styrofoam cup of ice cream that just tasted frozen. She asked for another cup as her mom grabbed her non-broken arm and pulled her out of the hospital with marching steps.

She never went to the hospital from then until now, with her seventh partner, Roger, who held her hand with both of his in the waiting room. His clunky Swiss watch digging into her thigh. The walls, like the rest of the hospital, were a sterile white and strategically littered with images of faces, arms, breasts, and even feet. *There isn't a part of you that can't be perfected!* read the brochure in her other hand.

"This is for the best," he said, "You'll be happier this way."

Lane just kept staring at the before and after picture of a woman's breasts on the opposite wall.

Twenty minutes later, a nurse called her name. She felt her legs twitch at the brief thought of running for the stairs, but the consultation had already cost \$1,300. Not something she wanted to throw away.

The white walls made the hallway seem taller and longer than it was. Lane wobbled a bit as they walked and Roger held her side to steady her. More images of symmetrical, rounded breasts taunted her, a crowning achievement of a handful of male doctors.

"In here," the nurse gestured into a small office, "Doctor Maxwell will be with you shortly."

They stepped inside the office, also white. A plain metal desk sat in the center of the room, gray and sleek, with only a folder and a pen on it. *How foreboding*, she thought. The couple sat down in the plastic straight-backed chairs. Roger let go of her hand. She stopped herself from wiping it on her skirt.

The doctor walked in seconds later. He was short and thin. The skin of his face was wrinkled, eyes deep and puffy. He shook Roger's hand as he sat down in his chair.

"So, tell me what you want to know."

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Lane remembered the day her mom died. It was sudden and abrupt and reckless, just as she would've expected her mom to go. The painkillers had only been the catalyst. At 17, a part of her had been prepared for the final overdose. The time that the treatments couldn't bring her back, modern medicine reaching its limits. By that time in her life, her mom had nearly every part of her body surgically corrected, that had been her first addiction, but human bodies can

only handle so much manipulation and ruin. The doctors gave her pills to keep the pain away and she was always in pain.

In the end, she had been high and so had the man who was driving the car. One of the many men who she'd slept with while her dad was in and out of prison. Her mom, feeling what she thought was alive, stood up and stuck her head out of the sunroof. When the man swerved to avoid the biker, she had half her body sticking out of the top of the roof. The police told Lane they'd only been able to recover from her torso up.

Lane rested her arm against the kitchen counter. Staring down at the sample pictures from the doctor, Lane didn't see her mom in either image. She didn't know if she wanted to. Her natural face was the genetic production of her mom's, but Lane couldn't remember which parts were hers.

Lane set the picture on the island and stood up from the metal stool. She couldn't stop herself from looking at it. They'd gone to the doctor three days ago and the altered image followed her into sleep.

The kitchen was full of chrome appliances and dark wood. Lane spent most of her time here, even though she didn't know how to cook anything. The sliding doors had the best view of the house's position. A lush backyard that sat above everything else with the rest of the city at its feet.

"I think you'd look beautiful," a voice behind her said.

Lane turned to see Chandler standing in the doorway, dressed in navy blue dress pants and a gray vest. Her eyes caught the gold inlaid watch on his wrist. She tried to remember the last time Chandler has stopped by. A week or two ago, maybe.

"You say that as if I'm not already," Lane said, crossing her arms over her stomach.

Chandler laughed. Still, she hated when Roger had his co-workers at the house.

“You’ve got a point,” he said, fingers running across the picture. The watch, Swiss, glinted in the sunlight.

“He doesn’t understand why I’m doing it. But he’s supportive.”

Chandler raised an eyebrow at her.

“Roger,” she said.

“Oh. Well, he’s never been one for physical beauty,” he said, “His office is tragic.”

Neither of them spoke. She stood next to the refrigerator, leaving the island in between the two of them. Lane looked over at the sliding doors. The sky was gray with thin rain clouds and the city below reflected it back, a shiny, lifeless silver.

“Do you understand why you’re doing it?” Chandler asked after several moments.

“Not really,” she said, “But why do I do anything I do?”

The next day, Lane woke up with a headache. She hardly slept and when she did, it was restless. Lane wondered if she’d been dreaming when she’d woken up to see herself standing at the edge of her bed, hair dripping water onto the floor and the face from the image glued to hers like a mask.

“When’s it scheduled for,” she asked Roger after spitting out a mouthful of toothpaste.

He rubbed his stomach and stretched, letting out a groan.

“The 17th,” he said.

Lane looked up into the mirror, making eye contact with herself as she continued to brush her teeth. The longer she stared the more she felt she could see each pore or wrinkle, gaping on her skin like cracks in the dirt. That was still two weeks away and Lane feared she might wither before it got here. The sense of panic was heavy on her chest. She spits in the sink again.

“Can we move it?”

Roger looked up from drying his face off. “I mean, yeah, but I don’t want you to rush into this, Lane. I know you’ve been waiting a long time, but—”

She threw down her stuff and left the bathroom. Lane heard him call after her, but he wouldn’t follow her. He knew better than that. Part of her wished he would.

Roger had been a friend of an ex-girlfriend she still talked. The only ex she talked to, in fact. It had been about three years ago that Hannah introduced him to her.

“He’s rich,” Hannah said, “And nice, too. He smiles at damn near everybody he sees.”

The two of them regularly had lunch together. Lane would complain about work and Hannah about kids and married life. She loved them, she swore, but sometimes, she was ready to rip her hair out at the sight of her wife’s collection of half-full water glasses.

“Hmm, alright. Hopefully, just not too nice,” Lane had replied.

“You’ll have to see for yourself,” Hannah downed the rest of her coffee, “Because he’s coming in the door right now.”

“Hannah, wait, what. No,” Lane turned to see a tall, lean man dressed in a denim shirt and khaki pants. He looked around the cafe, spotted them in the corner booth, and smiled.

Now, sitting on the floor of her bedroom, the large suite, soft and white, pressed down on her, Lane wished she’d been able to do more for that smile, but what did it really matter anyway. It would be still be here to comfort her after she cooled down.

She felt as though she were steaming, rolled up into a ball on the carpet. It was soft against her cheek. Under the bed skirt, she started through to the other side. More bare carpet, except for a stray shadow off to the side, pressed against the wall next to the leg of the bed frame. A box. The box that Roger’s watch had come in.

Lane turned over on her stomach, allowing herself to reach under the bed. She picked up the box, weightless. She flipped open the lid, empty. She wanted to scream.

After a while, her phone went off. On the screen, a single notification lit up. The calendar Roger had set up for the two of them had been altered: Appointment - March 6th. They didn't talk about it for the rest of the night. Roger made dinner for the two of them. When she finally made her way downstairs, she was greeted by the smell of cooking burgers and a smile.

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Lane woke up with another headache. She wondered if they could just take her brain while they were fixing everything else. She turned over to Roger sleeping.

“Why do I think so much,” she whispered.

Roger snorted and fluttered his eyes as if he were fighting to stay awake.

“If you'd only, say, you'd have less to think,” he said, slurring his words. Roger closed his eyes and she could hear his breathing deepen. Lane laid on her back.

She'd let them have her tongue too, then. Should've done that a long time ago, she thought.

According to her aunt, Lane had talked to everyone about everything, her new toys, a dog she saw in the park, her favorite foods. Lane didn't remember this. No childhood VHS tapes for her to look back on. Her parents never cared to take videos. She would just have to trust the few sane people from her past.

What she did remember was never talking. Talking got her in trouble. She was too noisy, too obnoxious, too stupid. So, she stayed quiet and replied in single word responses whenever she was spoken to. Lane didn't blame the others for not noticing.

Digging her fists into her eyes, she tried to pull herself from sleep. There was no need to go down that path. Lane picked up her phone and opened the messages between Hannah and her.

6:05 a.m: I think Roger's cheating on me.

6:12 a.m: what makes u think that?

6:14 a.m: Because he agreed with me for once.

6:17 a.m: ???

6:17 a.m: I found the box of his watch under our bed.

6:18 a.m: oh?

6:18 a.m: He hasn't worn it in weeks.

6:19 a.m: well, if ur sure

6:21 a.m: ...I'm sure

Two more days passed and the night before the surgery arrived. Lane slept as though she were in a deep coma. As if, somehow, her mind was at peace. As she sat in the kitchen, she appreciated the excuse not to eat.

Roger paced the house all morning. His loud footsteps stomped across the ceiling above her, then down the stairs, then through the main floor and back up the stairs. She sipped her water. On his third round, he stopped in the kitchen, breathing heavy.

"Have you seen the watch that you gave me?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Why?"

Roger didn't respond and started to pull open all of the drawers. Lane heard a knock from across the house.

"Roger," she said.

He kept rummaging through the drawers.

“Roger,” she said, louder.

“Huh, what?” he finally looked at her.

“There’s someone at the door,” she said as they made direct eye contact.

He scrunched up his face as if he had to process what she’d said. Closing the drawer, he left the kitchen. Lane heard the door open, but couldn’t recognize the person’s voice. The sun shining through the clear glass doors hurt her eyes. Trees painted with fresh leaves shimmered and danced. Lane took a deep breath and, for a second, she saw herself laying out on the grass, wind blowing across her cheeks, waiting.

“Hi, Lane.” It was Chandler. “I needed to drop something off and I thought I’d come to wish you good luck.”

“Thank you,” she said, not turning to face him.

Roger was back upstairs stomping.

“What’s he even looking for?” Chandler asked.

Lane stayed quiet, enjoying the view outside. She wanted to have this ingrained into her memories. If she found the time, maybe she could paint it, so idyllic. Roger grumbled into the kitchen.

“He’s looking for the watch I got him last year for our anniversary,” she finally said.

“Oh,” he said as though it was the simplest thing in the world, “I thought we left it in the nightstand downstairs.”

Lane heard shuffling behind her and took a deep breath.

“Of course,” Roger said, barely audible. More than one set of feet walked out of the kitchen.

She took another sip of water.

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Sitting in the hospital room, uncomfortably bare, Lane felt like a seven-year-old girl again. Nurses dashing in and out, doting upon her and prepping for the surgery. Roger didn't hold her hand this time, just sat in the single guest chair, smiling every so often. The photo on the wall wasn't a before and after, but the face glowed, proportional and perfect. It reminded her of her mom.

"Promise me," her mom had said one morning when Lane had gone in to clean up. The older woman hadn't left her room in several days, just to grab an apple and crawl back in. Lane didn't respond but looked at her with full attention.

"Promise me. Promise me that you won't do this to yourself," she tried to sit and collapsed back down onto the bed. Lane knew she was high.

"Do what?"

"Don't listen to them," she slurred.

Lane didn't get the chance to ask who "them" was, as she started snoring. She turned her mom on her side, covered up, and finished cleaning the room.

The next morning, the drugs had worn off and she emerged angrily. Lane had been making her lunch for school when she heard the door slam against the wall.

"Laney, where are you?"

"The kitchen."

Her mom walked and stumbled into the room.

"What the fuck are you wearing?" she asked, making her way to the refrigerator, "I swear that you just want people to think you're fucking ugly."

Her mom downed some Gatorade.

“Go change. Now”

It was this that replayed in her mind as the nurses came in and laid her bed flat. Roger appeared in the corner of her eye.

“Good luck, Laney,” he said and kissed her forehead.

As the bed began to roll away, she started crying.

The swelling she had been prepared for, but the pain was constant and unbearable. They had let her leave after two days of monitoring in the hospital. And now, she did nothing but stare at the steep living room ceiling. Most nights she slept in the recliner. The pain wasn't worth moving to the bed.

Roger was there when he needed to be, feeding her liquified foods and her pills. Otherwise, he kept his distance. Lane wasn't sure if the anesthesia had caused her to slip, but they couldn't make eye contact. He stopped smiling.

When he was at work, Hannah would come over, rubbing her legs and watching their favorite daytime dramas together. One day, about a week after her surgery, she looked over at Hannah. Her face, even in the harsh light of the television, was smooth and luminescent. Lane felt her chest tighten. Each perfect feature was a reminder of their failed relationship. Hannah eventually turned back and caught her staring.

“What?” she asked.

“Thank you,” Lane said, “for being here.”

Hannah squeezed her hand.

The doctor had told her it would be at least two weeks before she could take the bandages off. After that, it would be up to her to monitor her pain and swelling and determine if she was

ready to take them off. Lane decided to wait until the third week. Mostly inspired by Hannah's joke that it would be a birthday surprise.

The night before she'd planned on taking them off, Roger sat her down in the bedroom, eyes looking everywhere but at her.

"I know," she had said.

"What I—," Roger tried to speak, but closed his mouth. Lane explained that she'd already made plans with Hannah to live with her until she found an apartment of her own. *Not that it mattered anyway*, she thought.

Lane fiddled with her bandages in the dresser mirror. She ran her hands over the bandages on her jaw and nose, the pads under her eyes. She hadn't seen her face in weeks. In a way, this was the true relief. Layer by layer, she peeled the heavy white bandages off. These were changed regularly, but she'd asked the two of them not to make any comments when they helped change them. This was meant to be a complete first impression.

No one was home with her. The house was silent outside of the whisper of the vents, blowing cool air to fight the ever heating outside. Once the last bandage came off, she stared at the mirror for a long time, took one deep breath, and looked away. Lane had set the half-full pill bottle on the dresser next to the photo. Without the support of the bandages, her face was heavy and the pain spread throughout her body.

Her reflection felt as though the sample image had come to life. Lane walked around the bedroom, opening all of the vents and turning on the ceiling fan. A small breeze filled the room. She shivered and opened the bottle.

Setting the empty bottle back on the dresser, she laid down in the center of the room, the carpet scratched against her skin and closed her eyes, waiting.