AN INHERITED ART

**CASSIE FROESE[[1]](#footnote-1)**

When I am twelve, my mother tells me she prayed I would be born an average-looking child. While she was still pregnant with me, she would kneel beside her bed and earnestly beg God to keep her daughter from being beautiful, to keep her from the horror of a symmetrical face or an appealing figure. She never prayed for me to be ugly—not ugly, for heaven’s sake, not ugly. Just average. When I ask her why she would want such a thing, she replies, “If you saw what happened to pretty girls where I grew up, you’d want to be average too.” When I go to look in the mirror I poke and pull at my skin, trying to figure out if I’m ugly or average or pretty, but my reflection looks distorted, like one of those funhouse mirrors, and my eyes are falling out of their sockets and my fingers are as brittle as chicken bones and my hair is tying itself into knots like the thistles of a thorny bush and when I open my mouth to scream nothing comes out except a hoarse whisper like that of a dying old woman. I close the bathroom door behind me much too loudly and my mother yells at me from the kitchen to be quiet.

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When I am thirteen, I go over to a friend’s house after school and we host a fashion show in her living room. Her mom records us on the video camera and cheers us on as we descend from the staircase and strut down their hallway. My friend tells me I should borrow some of her clothes. She thinks I could be more stylish and doesn’t understand me when I try to explain that my mom doesn’t really like taking me shopping. I walk home with an armful of clothes and stand in the bathroom at home, trying all of them on again. I think am beautiful, but I do not know what the word means.

When my mom gets home from work, she sees me in a spaghetti-strap tank top with jean shorts and asks me where the hell I got those. I try to explain the fashion show to her in a way that will seem harmless. She does not listen, and forces me to change back into my old clothes, taking every article of borrowed clothing and stuffing it into a plastic garbage bag. I mutter something about how my father might have let me wear tank tops, and she snaps at me that I shouldn’t talk about things I don’t understand. I only say this to anger her; I stopped asking about him years ago. She has told me it was a one-night stand, nothing more, and for a long time I did not know what she meant. Now, when kids at school joke about being ‘an accident,’ I understand. I understand, but I do not care. Not enough to incur my mother’s wrath by asking about his name or what he looked like or how he smelled when she met him.

Later, I sneak into her room while she’s in the shower and I pull out a few pieces of clothing, running to my bedroom to hide them behind the books on my bookshelf. Sometimes, when she is still at work, I try on the clothes and walk around the house in them like a goddess. I command the attention of every empty room. I am dripping with charisma, eagerly lapping up every drop of influence I can find hidden inside photo frames and underneath the slats of the rocking chair in our living room and on top of the china cabinet that holds no china. I try to consume the solace found in these short-lived breaths of air. I pretend that I exist within myself, for myself, and that I alone can decide the fate of the kingdom before me. They say the greatest queens bowed to no one, and so I take a scepter in my hand and cast out every citizen with a heart of anything less than stone—I will not accept the softness of an acquiescent nation, I cry, and vow to behead those who lie to me, to purge the land of apathy and subservience because I refuse to believe the other old adage that haunts me, the one that whispers into my ears at night that every single apple in a kingdom is destined to fall below the branches of the tree that grew it. I deny and deny and deny and deny until there are tears streaming from my eyes and I have nothing left to say, standing in my castle, standing in the living room, wearing a sequined tank top and matching skirt.

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When I am fourteen, I steal a compact eyeshadow and some mascara with my friends from the Macy’s inside the mall. I am giggling alongside them as we try to look nonchalant walking out of the store, and to all of our surprise, no one stops us. We feel invincible. We stride through the second floor, pretending to ignore every teenage boy we pass. On a whim, we all get matching pairs of earrings and promise to wear them on the first day of school in the fall. None of us do.

I try to sneak past my mother on the second day of school wearing the stolen eyeshadow and mascara, but she notices and yells at me to scrub “that whorish shit” off my face, and I run to the bathroom, crying, trying my hardest to not let her see the tears. I furiously scour my eyelids with a wet piece of toilet paper until the sink is colored like a unicorn’s tail. Pink, blue, and purple eyeshadow runs laps around the sides of the sink, eventually slipping down the drain. I look up into the mirror and see that I have forgotten about the mascara—it is everywhere, but I don’t look like the raccoon that every girl at school complains about when they think their mascara is running, no, I look like a demon fresh from the pits of hell, a first timer on this earth who is scrabbling at the corners of humanity, hungry for a chance to prove herself. I feel powerful. I gently wash it off to get past my mother, but when I get to school I reapply the mascara, careful to make sure a little bit of it streaks underneath my eyes, and ignore my friends when they tell me to fix it. When I make direct eye contact with other people in the hallway, they look away first.

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When I am fifteen, my mother tries to tell me about the birds and the bees. I want to tell her it’s been a long time coming, that I already figured this stuff out without her help, but I know it would only make her upset. She explains it in a way that makes it sound painful, in a way that would discourage me from ever trying it if I didn’t know she was lying. She tells me men won’t listen to what I want out of it, tells me that it isn’t worth it. I wonder, secretly, what she has done.

Later that week at a school dance, I make out with a boy in the hallway, but when he tries to go further I make up an excuse about needing to help my friend with her dress and run away. It is not because I am scared, I tell myself. In an even fiercer voice, I tell myself it is not because my mother said not to. She does not control me. But when I close my eyes I see a younger version of my mother, youthful and gorgeous, full face of makeup and a line of boys behind her. She is beautiful but she is miserable. I wonder if that’s how she wants me to see her past self. My eyes still closed, I see my young mother grinning grotesquely, smearing the lipstick around her mouth when she wipes her lips, talons growing out of her fingernails, a waxy look to her skin. I see her being pulled apart by hundreds of hands, a thousand shapeless figures dragging her to every unwanted space, I hear her echoing through my mind over and over and over until I force myself to open my eyes because I cannot bear it anymore.

I walk back stiffly to the dance floor and refuse to acknowledge the boy who I made out with. He shoots me looks the rest of the evening, and every time he glances my way I laugh obnoxiously at the nothing one of my friends just said. I stomp on balloons in my heels and tell myself I will never be ruled by their opinions of me, not my mother, not that boy, nobody. I lie to myself until it becomes a desperate mantra. I chant it to myself at night when I’m lying in bed. “I will not care what they think, I am my own person. I will not care what they think, I am my own person.”

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When I am sixteen, I sneak out of the house regularly to drive around with my friends, who all have shiny new licenses. My mother lets me use her car occasionally, but she does not trust me enough to help me scrounge up the money to buy my own, so I am left to rely on others in order to come alive at dusk. I put more effort into how I look at night than I do during the day, and when I climb out of my first floor bedroom window and jump into my friends’ cars, I flip off my house to the supportive cheers of the girls in the car. I am a rebel, I tell myself. I want to scream it, but instead I laugh and cry and hang out at Perkin’s until 2 am.

We do this on summer nights, on school nights, on weekends, on days when our parents think we’re babysitting down the street or applying for jobs at the local supermarket and we never ever tell anyone. It is not so much of a secret as it is an escape. One of my friends shows me how to style my hair so I don’t look like I slept in a sewer, and I start experimenting with the different ways I can change myself. Though I still wear it, makeup no longer holds the same thrill as before; it was a gateway drug to the more dangerous forms of self-alteration, like confidence, or the ability to flirt. I flirt for fun, for laughs, for jokes. I never take any of it seriously, even when the boys think I’m ready to jump their bones. I push the boundaries but never actually break them, rather like a small child seeing just how far they can suggest different loopholes to a parent’s instruction before they are berated. I am gleeful and free and intoxicating and utterly, utterly afraid of being anything more.

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When I am seventeen, I develop an eating disorder, but I do not call it that. I call it things like not being hungry in the morning, like creating new excuses for my friends every time I gently refuse their offer of a snack, like saying I’m only doing it so I can fit into a new pair of jeans, like spreading my dinner around on my plate so it looks like I’ve eaten more.

Some days when I take off my clothes and evaluate where I stand, I see sickly thighs, but I do not call them that. I call them succeeding. Sometimes I see a dying girl, but I do not call her that. I call her powerful. I stare at my rib cage in the mirror and wonder what it would be like if my bones were sharp on the edges and could cut straight through my skin so that I had spikes on every edge of my person to ward away those who might harm me, to challenge anyone who looks at me twice or dares to try and define me. I wonder if, with these bones, I could hug my mother and impale her on them, pushing further and further until she is run through like a pig is run through by a poker over a fire.

She only starts to notice my weight loss when summer comes around again and, unable to bear the heat of my sweatshirt and sweatpants anymore, I wear a t-shirt one day. She gapes at my protruding collar bone and I feel a twinge of pride that I could prompt such a response from her. But then she talks for at least an hour about taking care of myself and how could I do this to her, and drags me to the doctor’s office, rebuking me the whole car drive over and only slowing down once we’re finally discussing options with the doctor. The doctor suggests that I start seeing a therapist, and asks if I feel pressure from my peers to look skinny. I lie to her and say yes, I feel pressure from my peers. That seems to be exactly she was expecting to hear, so I don’t offer her anything further. My mother looks at me for a long time while we sit in that office and I try to avoid her gaze.

When we get home, I make sure to eat something substantial in front of her, but she doesn’t seem to notice. When I pass her bedroom on my way to my room, I hear soft crying from behind the door. Within a few months of seeing a therapist, I am starting to heal; I do not tell her everything, no, only a few scrapings from the bottom of my barrel, but she helps me nonetheless, and over many months I start to recover. I learn how easy it is to conceal a part of you that you have already decided doesn’t exist. I learn that I lie to myself more than I do to others. I learn many things, but I do not know if I truly learn.

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When I am eighteen, I get a tattoo. A small bird on my wrist. It is cliché, and I love it. I hide it from my mother during the fall and winter by wearing long sleeves. I think she suspects that I am trying to hide a relapse eating disorder from her, but she never asks me to roll up my sleeves, and I know I look healthier than before. My breaths are deep, not shallow, and when I stand up I do not fear that I will pass out; I have started eating waffles once more and they taste like something not worth giving up again for skinniness. I know my mother can see the change.

I also know that while I may look better, she looks worse than before. She comes home from work and I see entire oceans beneath her sunken eyes, see her skin sloughing off her shoulders and falling into a pile on the floor. When she sinks into a chair and closes her eyes, I wonder if she has died on the spot, and a few times I absentmindedly look up the phone number for the funeral home before I even bother to check her pulse. I rub the bird on my wrist and cough sometimes, when she has been sitting like this for too long, and then look away when she opens her eyes and shakes her head a little.

One morning I walk past the living room and she is sleeping on the couch. I debate waking her up, but it is the weekend and she has no work obligations. Instead, I find a soft blanket and cover her up with it, pulling some loose hair out of her open mouth and watching her for several long moments, part of me wanting to reach over and hug her and part of me wanting to run far, far away, far enough so that I forget I took care of her like a child of my own. I sit in the kitchen and eat bowl after bowl of cereal, drinking the milk straight from the bowl and putting it in the dishwasher without making a single sound, then go to my room and try out a few makeup looks, putting on my blush mechanically and admiring my angles in the mirror with a selfish kind of satisfaction. I try so damn hard to forget the way my mother’s face looked empty while she slept, try to forget the horrible ache that stretched from my throat to the pit of my stomach and tore into my flesh with a fierce vengeance that I couldn’t stop no matter how hard I tried. When I daintily spritz fake freckles across my cheeks, I see a thousand bullet holes in my face, pinpricks of light shining from within me. They are blinding. I am blinding. I contour my jawline like one would draw a blade across a throat, like choosing a method for murder that would make a hunter shudder at its inefficiency, at its needless waste. I see blood pouring out of my neck and soaking the carpet but not a drop of it sticking to my skin, not a single drop. I want her to look closely, closer, closest, until she finally *sees me* and crumples back into herself, eyes rolling into the backs of her head, so she is terrified of me and who I know I am. I stab at my lids with my eyeliner, wishing I could use it as a knife to cut my eyes from my skull and tie them to fishing wire and dangle them in front of my mother, telling her, “Look, look, see what I can do? See how you can’t stop me? See what I’ve done all by myself?”

I lock the door of the house behind me and dance into the night. When I return home, long after the taste of cheap food has faded from the mouths of me and my friends, my mother is no longer on the couch. I climb into bed with the familiarity of a child hugging a stuffed animal and close my eyes. Everything has returned to itself again, this reality is stable. Yet my last thought before falling asleep is of my mother’s face, gentle, quiet, sleeping, distant from the conscious world she is so tired of.

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When I am nineteen, I enroll in the community college a ten minute walk from my house. It is all I can afford, as my mother tells me I cannot expect her to pay for my schooling. She says I should learn to be self-sufficient, and it takes all of my patience to hold my tongue, to keep myself from spitting that I would be able to afford a better college if I had a job in high school or maybe a car. Instead I channel my energy into my studies. I take some subjects that engage me and others that make me long for Perkin’s at 2 am. But all of my friends have left for four-year universities. I get a job at the desk in the admissions office and start to make money for the first time in my life. I buy new shampoo and body wash so that I can smell like a different person. I buy new clothes, ones that I like. I buy a car so I can drive to my job, an act of rebellion that my mother says she only lets me do now I am a college student. I pretend to play along with her, pretend that my autonomy didn’t exist until she wanted it to, pretend that even though I have been an adult for a year, I still owe her my obedience. I do it for the free room and board.

My mother still looks tired all the time. She is happier now that I have things to do, but she is worn. She slouches in her chair and picks at her food and sleeps more than she probably should. For Mother’s Day, I buy her flowers and a box of her favorite chocolates. When I hand them to her, she gasps and hugs me, holding me tightly for a short moment that ends before it has even started. I promise that I’ll be home in time to watch a fun movie later, or something, and I mean it. We are at a place where I can suggest these kinds of activities and there is no awkward, drawn-out pause as we try to figure out how to react to one another in a civil way. It is no pleasant field of existence, but is it not war-torn either.

After work, I find a bar where they don’t card you if you show some skin, and I tug down my shirt a bit before asking the bartender for a beer. I wonder, silently, while watching a football game on the TV directly above me, who else is sitting alone on Mother’s Day, who else is debating if getting drunk would make the day more bearable or less. I finally check my phone and see a missed call from my house. Part of me wonders if there was an emergency. Maybe the house burned down and she was roasted alive while staring at the carpet, waiting for someone to pull her out of the depths. I do not wonder why the thought does not scare me. Driving home, I see shadowy monsters keeping pace with my car on the side of the road; their eyes glow like tiny suns in the night and I stare, mesmerized, wishing I could be one of the dark with them.

When I get home, I close the car door and lean against it for a moment, breathing in and out, in and out, rhythmic, pulsing, steady, constant. Everything I am not. Everything I despise. I walk inside the house and am greeted by my mother, standing at the kitchen table, her hands clenched on the rounded back of a chair, her mouth tight. She asks me—demands of me—why I didn’t think to call her. I shake where I stand. I did not expect her to be angry when I came home. I slowly ask her what she means. She says I had promised to be back by nine, had I not? She points an incriminating finger at the clock above the stove, where it hangs guiltily, displaying ten o’clock. Shouldn’t I call to say I would be back later, she asks, if that was going to be the case?

I stare at her. I realize, suddenly, that she doesn’t know how often I used to sneak out; in fact, she doesn’t seem to know that I ever did. And now? I am more than an adult—even if she didn’t know before, it is certainly none of her business now. I do not say this to her. I say I’m sorry, it slipped my mind. I lie, as I am familiar with, comfortable with, and tell her I was just out with friends. This does nothing to placate her; she mockingly repeats my answer. With friends, of course, with friends, she sees it now. She shakes her head. A moment passes where it looks like she is remembering something that is now long gone, something that still haunts her, and I remember being alone at a school dance and having the smallest glimpse, remember seeing things that made me want to hide for cover and only surface when the sun had burned the earth away and all that was left was me, and dust, and death. For the first time in my life I feel like I might understand a tiny piece of my mother. Don’t you know, she asks in a quiet voice, what going out when you’re nineteen can lead to? Don’t you know? And I think I might. But then, without waiting for me, she continues in a stronger voice, reminding me that it’s dangerous to not call someone, to not let someone know where you’re going out in the world, in this dark reality, especially with the way I make myself look.

*Oh.* I see now, this was her final destination all along. I say that the way I present myself is not her choice, that I will be pretty if I so desire. She says being pretty only gets you in trouble. She says if I really cared about myself, I wouldn’t put on makeup, wear the clothes I wear, go out with friends, go anywhere where there are strangers for that matter, because no one is trustworthy, no one is safe. I ask her, gritted teeth and steel toes, if she is safe.

She squints, confused, and I realize she does not and will never understand. I want to pull her apart and turn her inside out and show her everything she has said and done to me over my short, pathetic lifespan and ask her if that was keeping me safe. Instead I whisper that I feel stifled by her. Her expression changes. I know her too well; we are mother and daughter, you see, and we have both spent a long time perfecting the inherited art of emotional defense. She insists that she has been trying to protect me, and can’t I understand that? Can’t I see it in everything she does, that all she wants is for me to be safe?

I throw my stuff on the ground. I say in a loud voice that she might have thought she was protecting me, but I always felt like I had no control. I say, even louder, that I have exhausted myself trying to regain that control and that I am still exhausted now, standing here in the entryway. She asks me—yells at me—can’t I see what happens when young girls try to take control of their lives in horrible ways? She says I should have joined a sport, or learned to paint. She says there were so many ways to express myself that did not involve my appearance, and I yell back that it was never about the appearance, it was about having some semblance of self-direction, like grasping at deflated life boats in a grainy sea, like standing outside on the lawn and tilting my head back to the sky while it rained in the hopes of maybe catching enough water to live for another day. She yells louder and so do I, and our voices blend together like we are the same person, and I want to strip my tongue away from this conversation, from this fight, from this chaotic carnival full of sights and sounds the masses have never seen before, where people pay their yearly salary just for a single ticket to see the miraculous showcase of two women who have discovered the secret to coexisting with your worst self and will gladly exhibit it for you, and she cries in a shrill voice that I should thank her for every single sacrifice she made for me, and *I* *scream* that I will never thank her for teaching me how to hate myself. She stops. Pauses. Then, in a whisper, she says she’s sorry.

I freeze. In this moment I am no longer here, I am twelve again, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, every age I have been and will ever be, and time stops. She said she’s sorry. I want to accept it, I want to, I want to, no I don’t. She has had nineteen years to say she’s sorry and if she is so blind that it takes me laying it out like this for her to offer up a crumpled apology then I don’t want it. The familiarity of the cage we built for ourselves is too strong, too strong, and I lost the keys a long time ago with the intent of never finding them again.

I grab my sense of self-worth from off the floor and tuck it into the front pocket of my bag and decide that I have nothing left here, anywhere, for her. I don’t forgive you, I tell her. I never will. She stares at me, mouth open in a way that suggests she might actually have a few meager words to give back to me, but I am already fumbling for the doorknob, needing space, needing silence, needing the claw marks in my mind to burn less intensely before I can listen to anything she has to say to me.

I slam the door behind me and run to my car, sitting down and forcing the keys into the ignition. I look at the rearview mirror—demon’s eyes stare back at me. I tug at the skin by my ears and peel it away from my skull until there are strips of it lying on the floor and I am left with streaks of blood like war paint across my cheekbones—I paint my lips with the watercolors she wanted me to take up instead of this and let the blues and greens bleed together and run down my chin, and I bare my teeth. When I drive into the shadows, the monsters keep pace with my car, and I whisper to them the secret that I’ve always carried inside me. My mother’s prayers were never answered, I tell them. They roar their approval. As I grip the steering wheel with one hand, I do not pick at my wounds or lick them clean. I do not find wounds at all.

1. Cassie Froese, a student at the University of Saint Thomas (MN), tied for second place in the Delta Epsilon Sigma annual short fiction undergraduate national writing competition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)