

THE CARE AND KEEPING OF YOU

By Brooke Jean

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A raw, rough talent that barges in and takes over. It's not without its youthful imperfections but this is brazen unbridled writing that comes up from the deep and it drips with authenticity. The hybrid slant imparts an innovative refinement while the voice reminds of Elizabeth Smart, a radical and underrated feminist poet/novelist. Jean's prose is frank and scars are brought sharply into focus. Here and there we are treated to passages of considerable power. Quote: '...we sit in psychology class and the instructor asks, "What is your earliest memory?" Our minds are blank. No one raises their hand. The distant recollections seep to the surface, but they feel like nightmares or memories of dreams—they aren't real. We stick the shovel in the dirt.'*

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When I was 10 years old, I was convinced I had cancer. Breast cancer, to be exact. I was jogging around the blue-taped perimeter of my fourth-grade gym class alongside one of my friends during our daily “warm-up” exercise. With each stride I took, though, I felt an odd tenderness – a soreness in my chest that I had never experienced before. I put my palm up to my heart as I ran, and I felt a small, but noticeable bump bouncing up and down along with the rest of my body. It was only on my left breast. I was stunned with fear, and I immediately felt I was going to die. *What is this? Why isn't this thing on the other side? This can't be right.*

It was a few weeks or a month until my other breast “budded.” I had no idea that this was completely normal. But, until the bumps matched each other, I peered down in awe-filled terror at my asymmetrical body every day. The only reference for my changing form was a copy of an American Girl-brand, paperback book that my mother had given me at some point in my childhood called *The Care and Keeping of You*. My mom was disabled, chronically fatigued, and emotionally exhausted throughout most of my youth, doing her best to deal with my drunken, unfaithful father. Confiding in either of my parents about anything personal was out of the question; my issues were nothing compared to their marital mess. I had two older siblings, but my sister was *too* much older than me to feel fully comfortable with (a 14-year difference... a whole generational wall), and my older brother was, well... an older brother. I sought out to settle my confusion about the changes I was going through the only way I knew how: learning about it myself.

My younger sister and I were as close as non-twin siblings could be. Paige was only 17 months younger than me. We taught ourselves everything we could about girlhood. We rifled through the pages of *The Care and Keeping of You* frequently; it was a fun, forbidden ritual of ours. We turned pages in apprehension, pointing at the cartoon drawings of girls trying on different types of bras or inserting tampons or battling eating disorders. We had competitions on who could find a more “gross” or “disturbing” image in the book, like the creepy monster illustration next to the paragraph about having nightmares or the unsettling depiction of a girl with body dysmorphia seeing an overweight reflection in the mirror when she was, in reality, sickly thin. Exposing our eyes early on to the horrors of girlhood prepared us for the even

worse experiences we would have as women. This book was our encyclopedia on *how to be a girl*. But no instruction manual can prepare a girl for what it's like to become a woman.

Girlhood is an isolating experience. It's a time of tumultuous, internal chaos. It's judgment and rolling eyes from the girl who was your best friend last year who suddenly isn't anymore. It's trying to replicate the girls in the TV shows and movies' perfectly straight hair, frying yours into brittleness by the age of 12. It's using your mom's foundation before you've even experienced acne and dark circles. It's sneaking your friend's perfume when she goes to the bathroom because it smells so good and it'll make that boy want to talk to you.

The peak of my sex education was when I learned what '69' meant at my fifth-grade lunch table from my best guy friend whispering the definition into my ear and cackling. *The Care and Keeping of You* didn't tell me anything about sex. Another thing I had to teach myself or it would be taught to me against my will. No matter what, it would be.

Girlhood isn't innocent. It lacks the wonder and playfulness that's depicted on TV with nuclear families. It's not pink ribbons and riding your bikes with your friends and having sleepovers with pillow parties and blowing bubbles in a park. At least, it wasn't for me.

Trauma and terror. Sleeping on the floor in the living room, feeling someone trip over your small leg in the dark, and hearing a grunt and a thud like a tree trunk meeting the forest floor. Visiting a rehab center every Sunday like it's church. Dear, God, praying every night, Amen. Dad holding his video recorder in his left hand, the lens covering his

left eye while his right eye peers at you, his mouth saying, “There’s the birthday girl. Say hi, sweetheart!” Straddling the toilet bowl like a horse while Mom brushes your hair with the violence of raking leaves. Hearing wails all through the night and resenting them, ignoring the pain and pushing yours down. Kicking in an electric guitar’s neck, mutilating it with steak knives. Smashing it to smithereens. Packing up the best toys in cardboard boxes and dooming the lesser ones to the dumpster. Starting at a new school and only learning there will always be girls prettier than you and boys smarter than you. Red staining my shorts. Trying a sip of beer for the first time and realizing your dad was right about vodka all along. Staring at your grandpa’s dead face, mouth wide open. An unwelcome hand. *The Care and Keeping of You*. Sitting in the backseat, gripping the oh-shit handle for dear life. Tampon instructions. Losing it in the pool. *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*. 911 pre-dialed while walking home after dusk. Pus and ugliness and hair and grease sprayed with free samples. The tall shoes that looked better at home. Headphones playing nothing, just noise. Playing with fire. Throwing out your bible. *The Virgin Suicides*.

I remember blowing bubbles and playing hopscotch and swinging from tire swings. But did I ever squeal with true delight? Or was there always an element of fear? Yes, girlhood is fear. Fear of being snatched up once the streetlights go out. Fear of Mommy and Daddy’s words turning into fists. Fear of the man at the grocery store who gets too close. Fear of getting in the shower, naked and alone, and the lights going out. Fear of descending into the dark, wet basement. Fear of touch. Fear of your uterine wall shedding. Fear of the unknown. It sneaks up on you. Suddenly, you’re 21 and you can drive around or move out or buy 6 bottles of wine and finish them in a week or fuck the

guy you said you wouldn't or stare at your empty bank account or lay in bed and decay for eight hours a day. Sweet, sweet freedom.

Many say a female's true transition into a woman occurs when she has her first menstruation, the indication that she can officially bear children. For me, the breast-cancer-like-bump was my defining moment, the beginning of my bildungsroman. Believing that you are dying is enough to make anyone snap into adulthood, into *womanhood*.

Early in my freshman year of high school, I met a girl at my bus stop who was friendly enough, and she suggested coming over to my house to hang out. She told me she was on her period and asked if I had a pad on me. No, but I do have tampons. Plenty of them. Her face twisted up like a screw. Um, if you use tampons, you're not a virgin anymore, she told me matter-of-factly. I remember being, for lack of a better word, flabbergasted because 1) I never would have guessed that she was still a virgin since I had already heard a slew of rumors about her (though I didn't care – I was desperate for friends), and 2) I had never heard a more puzzling statement in my life. How was a little cylinder of cotton anything like a dick? Do people actually think that a tampon robs you of your virginity? I was still innocent *in that way*, wasn't I?

Being a woman is realizing that losing your virginity is more than an inanimate object entering your secret catacomb. Virginity is symbolic (they tell us); it's special. Save it like a rare coin. It's a sign of purity, of innocence. Men don't want to fuck those who aren't pure and innocent. Men are the collectors of the special pennies of the world. Piggy banks that cash in whenever possible. Keep yourself nice and shiny for them, polished and pure and pubic-hairless. I always thought my body was a gift, as much as I

tried to destroy it. I told myself I'd only share it with those I deem worthy. Usually, though, they're not.

It crept up on you; you weren't ready. They always say you know when it's "right." This wasn't right. He removed all your articles of clothing but still had his shirt on. You are bare, exposed, unsure. Your face says it all. He is too caught-up in his red-hot excitement to notice. It's happening, it's uncomfortable, it's a little painful, then it's over. You immediately reach for your clothes and laugh. This is all it was. This is all it would ever be.

If girlhood is fear, then womanhood is coping. Yes, the art of repression. You've seen, heard, and felt shit, years and years of shit, shit that wasn't covered in *The Care and Keeping of You*. No one plans on digging a grave for their memories, but we all do it. We spot our scars in the mirror and ignore them, slap on some makeup. We chop and dye our hair. We smoke and inhale too long, a little hint of death to flirt with. We put the razor to our flesh – To cut or not to cut? Hamlet was onto something. We poison our bodies and minds until our childhood feels lightyears away – we sit in a psychology class and the instructor asks, "What's your earliest memory?" Our minds are blank. No one raises their hand. The distant recollections seep to the surface, but they feel like nightmares or memories of dreams – they aren't real. We stick the shovel in the dirt.

In therapy, they probably tell you that "talking about it" helps. Helps what? Fuck remembering. I need to keep moving, keep reading, keep writing, keep spilling my guts and purging my talents till all that's left are remains of the "gifted child" that was once so destined for greatness. Fuck girlhood. It may have built me, but it is not me. Your trauma is not you. Your fucked-up dad is a fossil.

My older sister had her first bout with cancer a year ago. It's peculiar how our bodies betray us. The surgeons scooped and scraped the toxic shit out of her skin. It came back this year, this time on her face. A face so lovely that I always wanted to replicate.

We not only have to worry about the genderless cancers – lymphoma, carcinoma, kidney cancer, etc. –, but also the No Boys Allowed Cancers. Breast cancer, ovarian cancer, cervical cancer, you name it. Yes, men can occasionally be afflicted with these terrible diseases, but they don't lose sleep over them. They're not 1 in 8 women. They're the tough guys who are after lung and liver cancer, triple-dog-daring it as they inhale and binge-drink their whole lives then beg for mercy on their deathbeds. My dad beckoned it for years and he's still fucking kicking, yet my sister who's a wonderful mother and friend and wife needs shit gouged out of her perfect skin at regular intervals. I could be next. I deserve it. We all do. None of us do. But we don't get to choose.

That white book taught me a lot that was never said out loud by my parents or teachers. I shared its lessons with my friends like a Jehovah's witness, carrying out my missionary duties. My mom always told me that education was important.

As hard as I try, I can only recall nightmarish snippets of the awful girlhood I endured. It might seem more awful in retrospect, or perhaps it was the living hell that I remember now. But every hell has its optimism, its great take-away.

“I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
 I turn and burn.
 Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
 You poke and stir.
 Flesh, bone, there is nothing there--

A cake of soap,
 A wedding ring,
 A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
 Beware
 Beware.

Out of the ash
 I rise with my red hair
 And I eat men like air.”

These words make my stomach turn, my blood boil, my skin flare. Sylvia Plath summed it all up: the disconnect from one’s own body, the need to re-claim one’s life from the patriarchal forces against it, the rebellion to those figures we are told are almighty – that is womanhood, noun. It is the antithesis to *The Care and Keeping of You*. It reminds you that Care and Keeping are not enough to make you strong, to rebel the shit that is pulling you taut. You need to face death one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine times. Doubt, despair, anger, suicidal thoughts: the food pyramid.

I'm still terrified to rake my own leaves, to put my hair up in a ponytail, to pull my face so tight I can't feel anything except pain. My worst fear is losing control, being stretched stiff like cellophane wrap around untouched leftovers. His hands on either side of you, binding you to the ground. Life will fuck you if you let him. Sometimes, blaming yourself is right. You let things happen to you. Sometimes you're the victim, sometimes you're the passive fuckee, sometimes you're the fucker. Womanhood is the balance of Caring, Keeping, and Fucking of You.

Q: What do you want to be when you grow up?

A: Lady Lazarus

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *'The Care and Keeping of You' was my final writing assignment for my first creative writing class in college. A week before the due date, this memoir-esque, feminist-y idea came to me. While the piece includes very real memories of my own growth from girl to woman, I heeded the advice of my professor to surprise the reader. Instead of opting for a straightforward story, I wanted to integrate elements from multiple genres: thus, the inner poet in me broke through and made my depressing childhood come to life. 'The Care and Keeping of You' aims to put readers in my position, not for pity, but for an awakening of hopefulness no matter how awful life had been to them.*

BIO: *Making my readers uncomfortable is my ultimate goal as a creative writer, putting a shattered mirror up to society and myself simultaneously is my secondary goal. As a senior English major with minors in philosophy and Hispanic studies at Roosevelt University, my writing inspirations are far and wide and existentially driven. I have been published in Voice of Eve and iO's Literary Journal's online publications. As an aspiring college professor, I hope I will one day inspire a generation to at least glance at their own shattered reflections.*
