Our Bodies Do Not Fit Us

*Man is physically as well as metaphysically a thing of shreds and patches, borrowed unequally from good and bad ancestors and a misfit from the start.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Two days after Billy Nelson stuffed and locked me inside a tuba case, he showed up at Cheri Traywick’s Christmas party wearing a dress shirt and tie. He lumbered left to right as he hauled himself into Cheri’s living room. Most of us feared Billy Nelson. When he flipped a countermarch on the football field, his shoulders jostled the French horn player in front of him and the tuba player behind him. The column clogged like a hairy drain, a knot, a jumble that cost us points at UIL. In his doughy hand, his trumpet looked as tiny and ridiculous as a paperclip. To enter the band hall, Billy opened both double doors, and there was a rumor that he’d once yanked them open so hard that the hinges were stripped and the doors hung cattywhompus for two months until new ones were installed. A girlfriend of mine said she personally saw a desk collapse under his weight when he sat on it one day in Algebra. And though I pondered daily the politics that made some kids outcasts and others idols, I never understood how Billy Nelson—a tubby who had to special-order his uniform—managed to squeeze himself into the popular crowd.
That December night, when Billy appeared in the doorway, the party shut down. We’d never seen him wear anything other than jeans and triple-X T-shirts. And there he stood—awkward as church clothes, jamming his fist into the waistband of his Levi’s because his shirt, too short for his body, wouldn’t stay tucked in. Cheri swiped the needle off the Styx album she was playing. We stopped talking—all of us. Except for the scrawny saxophone player—the seventh grader too green to know better, the dolt who, at Pizza Hut after a football game, crushed and snorted Smarties in a desperate attempt to align himself with the true musicians, the rock ’n’ rollers, not us Beethoven nerds. This seventh-grade dimwit continued to rattle through the soda cans in the cooler, hunting a Pepsi and calling attention to himself.

When the sax player realized the room had died, he cracked open a soda, plugged it into Billy’s paw, and said, “It ain’t Halloween, pal. What’s with the costume?”

Billy hooked his arm around the kid’s shoulders and shook him so his head wobbled like a dashboard hula girl. We turned our backs against the two of them, feeling grateful, pretending we didn’t hear the kid yelping.

All night, Billy and the rowdy drummers—the boys every girl dreamed about at night—stood guard near the refreshments, pranking on one another and chowing, while my friends and I huddled in the corner like mice too afraid to stir for a crumb of cheese. Occasionally Billy pointed in my direction, and the drummers sniggered and shook their heads no. I was a delicate, bookish, 85-pound girl. My body buckled during the heat of marching practice, labeling myself forever a cripple, a throwaway. Obviously I didn’t have the stamina to attract popular boys: if I couldn’t handle the Texas sun, how could I manage a beer or stealing from my bedroom window after curfew?
But some King Kong’s are mysteriously attracted to Faye Wray’s, and eventually Billy brought me over a soda and a cookie. “You’re pretty skinny,” he said. “You should eat something.” He put the goods in my hands then walked away.

I stared at the cookie, lying on a pink napkin.

“I wouldn’t eat that,” one of my friends said. “It’s probably laced with Ex-Lax.”

Another friend nodded his head. “Yeah,” he agreed. “He shut you in a tuba case.”

At his post by the food table, Billy himself scarfed four hot dogs and nursed a bag of potato chips, grappling fistfuls of Lay’s and cramming them into his mouth.

Around 10 p.m., when my father was coming for me in fifteen minutes, Billy clumped over to the stereo and loaded a Barry Manilow album onto the turntable. Before I figured where he was headed next, he had snagged me from my cluster of allies and draped me over his shoulders like a shed jacket.

“Hey!” one of my braver friends squealed.

“We’re dancing,” Billy told him.

He toted me to the middle of the living room where Cheri, simpleminded Cheri, had cleared the furniture to encourage romance, dancing, boys and girls holding hands. With my cheek resting against Billy’s shoulder blade, I could feel his shirt damp from sweat. What I smelled was fear.

In the center of the room, he slid me off his shoulder but pinned me against his belly and swayed back and forth in rhythm. I’m not sure my feet were touching the ground. My nose was smashed between his breasts. When the song ended, he pointed to a sprig of mistletoe tied to the chandelier overhead. “Looks like we’re gonna kiss,” he said, then wormed his hands under my armpits and hoisted me to eye-level.
In his grip, I flopped like a hooked fish until I squirmed free. “I will *not,*” I said, but then hearing the severity of my reaction, I offered, “My dad. He’ll be here any minute.”

That night, in the car on the way home, I told myself I could take pride in not having used a fat kid to gain entrance into the popular crowd. I told myself that when I turned away from Billy I didn’t hear his voice, soft and wobbly: “We could dance again.” I’d like to swear to you now that I wasn’t mature enough to understand that a boy, young and inexperienced and somehow connected to his caveman instincts, would yank a girl’s hair, punch her shoulder, or shut her in a tuba case because he didn’t know how else to get her pretty attention. And I’d like to say I remember the face—the landscape of nose, browbone, and chin—of the first boy who ever wanted a dance or wanted my kiss. But the truth is, I only remember his body: his hands large and dimpled, the slick of sweat on his arm, the bulk of his shoulders, the girth of his silhouette as he jostled down the halls.