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## Minor Things

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## Connaughton: Minor Things

### MINOR THINGS

BY

### ELI CONNAUGHTON

I needed a bra. The fact that no one would have identified my bare chest as female was irrelevant. It was middle school and being braless had become a hazard on par with rampant acne or a pronounced overbite.

"I went to pop her bra strap, and she's not wearing one," said Will Horton. Will had been standing behind me in the lunch line when I felt a pinch in the middle of my back. Now he was choking with laughter and his whitewashed skin had turned the color of a plum. Even the round lunch ladies chuckled as they slapped spoonfuls of shepherd's pie on our plastic trays.

"Screw you, Will." This was the only thing I could think of to say. I'd heard the comeback several times before, and liked

the way it felt in my mouth, powerful and mature.

"You better screw yourself," Will said. "Cause with those things no one else is going to."

I still don't think I fully understood what the term meant from an anatomical standpoint, but my ears burned with shame. I focused on pulling my lunch ticket from the pocket of my jeans and handing it to Miss Josie at the cash register.

"Don't you let no boy talk to you like that." She shook a finger in my face and then at Will behind me. "You better treat these girls with some respect."

I handed her my ticket and smiled at her, but she just shook her head as she placed my ticket into her drawer. Will followed me to the lunch table,

all the while informing those classmates who had not had the privilege of witnessing our encounter that I was without a bra. It was times like these when I hated myself most. The times when I could feel my throat swell and burn, when I knew I was weak.

It was January, and my father was still in the hospital, though out of intensive care. Because of this, I actually saw my mother a few afternoons a week. On these days, I liked to pretend my father was at work and that he was not lying in a bed with half of his skull removed. I had seen him on Christmas day and the way his head caved in on one side had made me wish I hadn't. A perky nurse had explained that his skull was in a refrigerator. "Isn't that neat?" she had said. I saw nothing neat about it. Sometimes before I went to sleep I could see it. A skull, dirty with dried blood and the fingerprints of doctors. It balanced precariously on a shelf amid soft drinks and yogurts and unidentified leftovers enclosed in styrofoam boxes.

When I got home, my mother was in the kitchen

washing dishes. Mary Kinsey, my three-year-old sister, was rummaging through a drawer of Tupperware. After a few post-school day pleasantries, I told my mother that I needed a bra.

She shut off the water and turned to face me. Her eyes briefly dipped to my chest. "Well, I guess we can talk about it."

"I'm almost thirteen," I said.

Mary Kinsey crammed a plastic bowl into the open trash compactor.

"Let's not do that, Mary Kinsey," my mother said, fishing the bowl from the trash. She turned the water on again and rinsed it. Her yellow gloves squeaked against the plastic.

"Can we go today?" I asked. It was Tuesday and the thought of three more full days of school without a bra was making me nauseous.

"No, Mary Kinsey! No, ma'am." My mother was across the kitchen in one step and she grabbed my sister's pudgy forearm just before she dumped a box of angel hair pasta on the floor. Mary Kinsey howled.

"Go to your room until you can be nice," my mother said. Mary Kinsey stared at her until

my mother growled, "Now."

My mother was petite and blonde and, at 39, she still looked like she had been plucked from the top of a cheer-leading pyramid. But she could instill fear, and so Mary Kinsey marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs, wailing but obedient.

"We are not going to the mall this afternoon."

I knew I should have dropped the subject. She was mad and tired, and I was making it worse. Instead I decided to play on her sympathy. "All of the other girls have bras and now everybody is making fun of me because I don't have one."

"Don't worry about them," she said. It was the speech she gave me when I told her that people clucked like chickens when I wore gym shorts or that the Jenkins twins could not look at me without commenting on the size of my nose.

She went on to explain how girls who already had boobs would one day have trouble keeping the weight off, while I would be able to eat whatever I wanted. But this provided no comfort. My own adulthood was as unfathomable to me as my

mother's childhood.

"You could just drop me off with a credit card," I said.

"I swear, Elizabeth." She had taken off her latex gloves and now smacked them against the counter. "Every time I turn around it's these kinds of pants or that kind of purse or earrings or God knows what else. Your father was in intensive care and you and your sisters still had a wonderful Christmas. And I haven't heard one thank you for any of it."

I looked down at the tiled floor and followed the lines of grout with my eyes. I waited for her to break the silence. "Go get your sister out of time out," she said, and I moved upstairs without a word.

Ashley Hudson and I had been best friends in fifth grade. She was a beautiful girl whose smooth olive skin, dark hair and full lips gave her an exotic quality made all the more pronounced by the fact that her parents were divorced. I loved her devotedly because she was mouthy and sarcastic and seemed not to care what anyone, including the teachers, thought of her. I was a skinny parasite,

feeding on her strength and self-confidence. In return for my idolatry, she hung out with me. We spent countless nights at each others' houses, swam, and played tennis together. We held contests to see who could eat her barbecue sandwich the fastest and spread glue on our hands to see who could peel away the largest continuous sheet after it dried.

Then in sixth grade I switched to public school, and she cut me off faster than a clump of split ends. She stopped speaking to me and the times when I saw her, at choir and ballet, she convinced the other girls in the class to ignore my presence as well. Her abandonment had left me anxious. It was like the earth had suddenly cracked open beneath my feet. Not understanding why she liked me in the first place made it impossible to fathom why she didn't.

And then a miracle happened. When the blood vessels in my father's brain exploded the following year, her stepfather was his neurologist. And so, either because of pity or a direct order from her mother, she had started to invite me

over again.

It never crossed my mind to say no. She never apologized and so I never forgave her. Instead I tried to squeeze myself back into the space I had occupied before. I listened to her stories of the previous year. Sixth grade had been a petrie dish for Ashley's more rebellious behavior. She told me that she had smoked cigarettes and drunk beer with an eighth grade boy. She had kissed this boy and had let him put his tongue in her mouth, and said that she liked it. I did not tell her that I too had kissed a boy, Greg Welch, but that when he had finally shoved his tongue through my closed lips I had been so startled that I bit him.

Ashley and I quickly fell into our roles of goddess and fanatic, and I tried my hand at smoking menthols. At first they made me feel dizzy and queasy, and Ashley laughed at me when I had to lay my head down on the cold dirt behind the sprawling holly bush in her back yard. But then it got better, and I found I enjoyed the sensation of the menthol and icy air entering my lungs. It made me feel clean inside.

The next three days at

school had been more of the same, with all of the boys pinching my spine in the middle of my back. The joke never seemed to get old to them and I did my best to ignore them. On Friday, I spent the night at Ashley's house, and as we changed out of our clothes and into pajamas, I noticed she was not wearing a bra either.

"Do you have a bra?" I asked the next morning, hoping we could commiserate. We had already watched two hours of cartoons and polished off an entire box of Lucky Charms. Now, we sat in her backyard with four cigarettes she had stolen from her mother's purse. It was overcast and smelled like snow, though living in the South, we knew the chances were small. Ashley lit a cigarette and handed it to me. I inhaled and felt the rush of the menthol and smoke in my chest. Ashley lit another one for herself and for a while we sat in relaxed silence.

"Sure," she said and put the cigarette to her lips. She inhaled deeply and I admired the beautiful curve of her lips. "Got it last year."

I wasn't sure how to

proceed. I didn't want to tell her I didn't have one. After our first falling out, it seemed that me not owning a bra was as good a reason as any for her to start hating me again. I was thankful for the cigarette as it allowed me to stall a moment. Ashley pulled her non-smoking hand into the sleeve of her hoodie sweatshirt and shivered. Suddenly, I knew what to say. "If I tell you something do you swear not to tell anyone?"

Ashley's eyes widened a bit. "I swear I won't say anything."

For the first time in our relationship I felt I was just as cool as she was. I blew smoke out of my mouth and it mixed with the steam of my breath. I could have been a dragon. "I gave my bra to Greg Welch."

I had not yet come up with any sort of rationale for this action, but fortunately I didn't need one. Ashley, having an older sister and experience with eighth grade boys, drew her own conclusions. "You let him touch your tits," she said, then whooped with laughter and rolled onto her back. She kicked her feet in little flutter kicks. "You are shitting me," she said over and over again.

Then she hoisted herself back to a seated position and brushed the pine needles from her hair. "That is awesome."

I would have corrected her, but to do so would have meant erasing the almost proud look on her face. "I mean, Greg Welch is cute. I would totally let him touch my tits."

The fact that neither of us had these tits meant nothing as we launched into a discussion of who we would and would not allow to touch them. After exhausting the lists of seventh grade males of Christ Church Episcopal School and Beck Middle School, I asked Ashley if I could borrow a bra to get me through the next week until my mother could get me a new one.

She assessed my chest as though inspecting a car door for scratches. "Mine would be too big for you," she said.

My father should have died. He should have been paralyzed on the left side. Ashley told me these things because her parents talked about them when her father came home from the hospital. He told Ashley's mother how much blood had flooded my father's brain and

how impossible it was that he lived. How impossible it was that he moved and thought and spoke. *He actually wrote down the word "Pepsi" for Christ's sake!* There would be damage, he told Ashley's mother, and only time would tell how much. Ashley heard them whispering in the kitchen.

Ashley told me these things as though she were passing along gossip about a mutual acquaintance. I listened, though the words meant nothing. I could not place this man—gaunt and scarred and frightened—in the spot he had once inhabited. My father was somewhere else. Not gone and not here.

I liked to think he was hiding somewhere in the house like he had always done when I was younger. He loved to scare us, and would hide in closets or behind walls or under beds so he could leap out and hear our squeals. My mother was seldom amused, but I loved it. I loved the way my heart pounded and my stomach seemed to explode into my arms and legs. But, more than anything, I loved my father's laughter. It's not as though he never laughed, but these particular episodes were

of their own kind. It was like he was possessed by something beyond himself. Maybe it was his own relief at not having to think for one moment about the concerns of his dental practice or any number of ways he was always trying to better himself—by running, by reading the Bible and teaching Sunday School, and going on marriage retreats with my mother. Whatever it was, I loved watching him crumble to the floor and roll around. I loved his tears and coughs and the way he would finally roll onto his back and close his eyes when it all subsided. “I got you good that time,” he would say. “You should have seen your face.”

By the end of our second cigarette, Ashley and I had formulated a plan to go to the mall. Ashley’s mother dropped us off in front of the Baskin Robbins at McAllister Square and gave us each five dollars for lunch, which we added to the small wads of allowance money we had stuffed in our pockets. The mall was full of young girls like us. Girls without drivers’ licenses or jobs or tits. Girls who lusted after jean jackets and hair

accessories the way boys must have over smuggled Playboys. Of course boys went to the mall too, mainly because they hoped to see their girlfriends there and make out with them on faux wooden benches in the semi-privacy of plastic ficus trees.

It felt good to be walking through the mall with Ashley. I felt safe. I could pretend that whoever was waving at her was waving at me. I could say things in the way she would say them and believe I was beautiful.

“Hey Ash,” said some boys in front of the Chick-Fil-A.

She waved at them, so I did too.

“Dicks,” she said as we passed. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her sweatshirt. I envied the way her hair looked, messy and unbrushed in a loose ponytail. I had dressed up in my wide wale corduroys, penny loafers, and a turtleneck sprayed with tiny strawberries.

We walked through the wide wing of the mall, past the record store blaring *The Tide Is High*, past the women’s clothing shop with naked mannequins staring at us through the window. We entered Belk’s Department store, greeted by



the cosmetics counters that smelled of cinnamon and gardenia. The bored saleswomen with glossy pink smiles beckoned for makeovers.

The lingerie section was at the rear of the store. It was a sea of bras and panties. Lace, satin, cotton. Ashley grabbed an exceptionally large bra from the rack and held it up to her chest which could have fit in one cup. I followed, grabbing a similar size with fat straps and rows of hooks four deep. I put one of the cups on my head like a beanie. Ashley snorted with laughter.

"Can I help you ladies?"

A grandmotherly woman with a huge bosom appeared. Her thin lips puckered in disapproval, and I noticed that her red lipstick had seeped into the creases around her mouth. "I don't think that's your size," she said and gestured her gray pouf of hair toward the bra Ashley held.

I felt my face flush the way it always did when I was caught doing something I shouldn't have been. Not that making fun of oversized undergarments was any real crime. But I was always able to attach some degree of

guilt to my actions, and now I was sure that we had hurt this woman's feelings.

So when she led us to a display entitled MY FIRST BRA, I followed dutifully. The woman gestured to the rows of bras, which, in comparison to their more supportive counterparts, looked like they were made for little dolls. The cups were simply triangles of cotton attached to skinny straps. Some were white and others beige. "Now," she said, inspecting our chests through thick bifocals. She turned and flipped through a line of blue boxes that hung behind the displays. Her fat fingers agile and purposeful. She selected four boxes and handed two to me and two to Ashley. "Why don't we take these into the dressing room and get y'all fitted?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. Being fitted was the least I could do.

"We're good," Ashley said. She was already halfway to the fitting rooms by the time I figured out that she had left me alone with the saleswoman. I ran after her.

"God," Ashley said when I caught up with her. "That woman's breath smelled like dog

poop. I thought I was going to puke.”

We walked down the hallway to the last dressing room. “Dear Lord, please don’t ever let us get that smelly and fat and old,” Ashley said.

“Amen,” I said. Of course, it was not a wish or a prayer because we knew we wouldn’t. We entered the dressing room. The brown carpet had begun to unravel in places and the beige walls were stained. Even the light seemed worn out.

Ashley pulled her sweat-shirt over her head, and I removed my turtleneck. I looked at our shirtless bodies in the mirror. Her skin was still somewhat tanned, even in the middle of January, and the nipples of her breasts were brown. I noticed they were larger than mine, rounder with the first lump of womanhood. Mine were pink and tiny. Pencil erasers balanced on puckered circles the size of dimes.

We each took a wrinkled bra from its box and shook it into its shape.

“Do it this way,” Ashley demonstrated. She wrapped the bra around her waist with the hooks in the front. Then

she climbed onto the bed and over her ribs, putting her arms through the straps at the end. I did the same, and Ashley and I assessed our bodies in the mirror.

“You seriously have no boobs,” she said. It was a sad sight. Excess fabric puckered over my nipples and the straps sagged on my shoulders. “What did Greg say?”

For a moment I forgot my lie and thought she was asking about what he said when I bit his tongue that night: *Bitch*.

I shrugged. “I guess he liked them. Didn’t say much one way or the other.”

Ashley and I were quiet for a while. For the first time that week I felt excited and hopeful. I would have a bra strap to pop. I didn’t know what it meant other than it was better than not having one. The fact that I didn’t have the money for the bra was a detail I chose to deny.

It must have been around this point when Ashley and I made the decision to steal the bras. I don’t remember saying anything about it. I don’t remember either of us introducing the idea. We simply put our tops on over the bras.

Another size? Any adjusting?"  
The saleswoman's voice sang  
over the door.

"No, ma'am," we sang back  
in unison. Our manners were  
perfect. Our mothers would  
have been proud.

Once out of their boxes,  
the bras were easy to steal.  
Mine was trickier since my cot-  
ton turtleneck was white and  
more form fitting than Ashley's  
sweatshirt. But I was not about  
to back down. The bra was my  
amulet, protecting me from  
consequence and future ridicule.  
I strode through the exit of the  
department store and out into  
the mall, amid squeaking shoes  
and babies crying in strollers  
and teens eating large triangles  
of pizza. I was sure that every-  
one saw me differently. I was  
no longer a scared girl but an  
outlaw with proper chest cover-  
age. Ashley and I spent our five  
dollars on fries and a milkshake  
and laughed at the saleswoman,  
who had probably just now  
discovered that two bras were  
missing.

For a small time that after-  
noon, I was able to believe that  
maybe I did not need anyone to

get the things I wanted in life.  
Not Ashley, not my mother or  
father. I was metal. Strong and  
unfeeling. Back at Ashley's, I  
packed my suitcase more neatly  
that I usually did, and on the  
ride home I didn't feel any  
dread.

It was not until I was back  
in my house that I began to  
doubt. My mother wasn't home,  
but she would be back in the  
afternoon. A neighbor was on  
the telephone speaking in the  
same hushed tones that had  
become so familiar. At first I  
had struggled to hear what was  
being said. I had even picked  
up another telephone line to  
try and find some information.  
But even then, I had not known  
what was being said. Adulthood  
was like its own country with  
its own language that no mat-  
ter how hard I studied, I could  
never quite understand.

I wore the bra until  
my mother came home. The  
moment I heard her car pull  
into the driveway, I wriggled out  
of it and shoved it between my  
mattress and box springs. At  
dinner, my mother told us how  
my father had lost his peripheral  
vision and depth perception, but  
that we were lucky. We needed

## Connaughton: Minor Things

to say thank you to God every day because, after a cerebral hemorrhage, things like loss of vision and his dental practice were minor things.

But that night I worried. I wondered how much retribution a stolen bra would exact? Because of what I had done, would my father die in the night? Surely God had seen me. I imagined Him sitting in white robes on a throne behind the mirror while I had put my shirt on over the bra. Some punishment would follow. But this is the magical thinking of adolescence. I believed that night, just as I would believe into my own adulthood, that even through my smallest thoughts or actions, I had the power to kill him or save him.