

Excerpt from

SKIN DEEP

by

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“From five the girls had been reduced to four, and they were all - the living and the dead - becoming shadows.”

Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*

”She speaks very quickly, impulsively, and (it seems) indifferently... so that the important and the trivial, the true and the false, the serious and the joking, are poured out in a rapid, unselective, half-confabulatory stream... She may contradict herself completely within a few seconds... will say she loves music, she doesn't, she has a broken hip, she hasn't...”

Oliver W. Sacks,
The Man who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales

The individuals and facts in this story are real.
My daughter's age, the place of residence, and all the rest are fake.

Skin Deep

The woman in the photo was a victim of her father's sexual abuse. Aggressive and quick-tempered, he took his anger out on her, or so they said in the family where everyone knew, and no one protested. A generation goes by, and the youngest son tells his wife who tells her daughter, me.

I don't remember the name of my great-grandfather, who died long before I was born, nor do I have any photos of him.

When I picture my grandmother as a little girl I see a faceless man enter the bathroom (at the time there were no bathrooms), he goes in and puts his hand over her mouth. Often, fantasizing, I've wondered what I would have done when I was seven, the age when my grandmother was raped by her father.

To the relatives who will object: such a thing never happened in our family, this is defamation! my answer is: you're right, it was my maternal grandmother, an aunt, the nanny (in 1955, a fifteen-year-old girl came to Rome from Brittolli, a province of Pescara, with obvious physical issues, such as deformities of both feet and her left leg, that forced her to wear heavy orthopedic shoes. The girl was working for an elderly widower in the building where my grandmother – this time maternal – had a hat shop, Via dei Prefetti 35. Everyone knew about the young woman being abused. For a time no one stepped in, until one day my grandmother hired the girl and took her to live with her. She was my mother's nanny, then mine and my brother's. She never mentioned the man who had abused her, either in the stories she told us to make us fall asleep, nor later in the daily talks when we were practically adults. When he died, the old man left her a sum of money and she accepted it.)

A recent item in the news relates to these events, having similar circumstances and victims: a sixty year old woman, afflicted with a slight mental retardation, in the province of Treviso.

After being tricked and lured into her brother-in-law's farmhouse, she is held captive by him. Kept locked up in the chicken coop, she is beaten and raped. Fed bread and water. Left to lie on the packed dirt amid her excrement and those of the hens. Meanwhile, her jailer steals her BancoPosta card and withdraws her disability pension, four hundred euros. Before the victim can manage to escape, before she finds the courage one night, driven by the thought of her distant son, to whom, under threat, she was forced to write the message: "I'm going to live in Romania, don't look for me" (she will report this to the investigators). A few days after the man cuts off her hair with a pair of poultry shears.

Like a man, she says, seeing herself in a mirror after the escape, bursting into tears. So she decides to wear a woolly skullcap.

I stared death in the face, she tells the investigators, referring to the haircut – the worst moment.

Not the rape, not the beatings. Not the excrement, the hunger, the cold.

Odd how the human mind works.

It works differently for each of us based on our perceptions, and also on our physical characteristics. The same event will have as many versions as the number of people who experienced it.

Everyone finds sorrow and joy where others do not. Actually pleasure resides in different places, emotional chasms that vary with the individual. Among all the human feelings, pleasure is perhaps the greatest mystery.

So my paternal grandmother, suffering from Alzheimer's, didn't recognize anybody towards the end. Anyone who went to see her was mistaken for her father. Daddy, she would say. And when it was time to say goodbye: don't leave me. Her father was the only person she called for.

Book One

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When they ask me what it feels like to be famous, and I reply nothing special, I'm lying. You can't imagine the giddiness, the intoxication in front of an applauding audience. On a stage, behind a lectern, across a table, before a microphone like tonight.

I don't think I'm the greatest, I say. Just a normal person, a woman like any other. I smile, I tilt my head. I have great confidence in mankind, I won't lie, I go on, it all depends on us, cultivating the common good means reaping good – and here I'm really acting, while the lights behind the TV camera irradiate my person, making me an evanescent figure. And I look straight ahead, right at you who will see me from home, all of you sitting across from the screen.

Let's hit pause at this precise moment, December. Who am I in this town hall, in front of an audience and a local TV camera, whose footage will be broadcast online.

On TV I found out that I had become beautiful. I have never been so, as the novel to which I owe my fame recounts, dwelling on the impact with reality of a twisted mind that thinks she is gorgeous, greatly loved – me as an adolescent, me as a child.

On the screen I contemplate another me who has overcome her inadequacy. Slimmed down, with chestnut blonde hair chosen by the hairdresser to better illuminate the face. Although I have white teeth, I considered whitening them. A whiter shade. What next? How to further intervene in order to stay in this perfect moment? Botox.

This is who I am first and foremost: a successful person.

I go to the hairdresser. I buy clothes, shoes. I ask about possible discounts: if a well-known personality (a figure who attends public events and is photographed maybe not individually, maybe in a group), if that person decides to wear a single designer label, wouldn't she be entitled to a fifty percent discount, even a sponsorship?

I travel. I speak in cities throughout Italy, like tonight in this town hall, where someone from the audience yells: you're terrific!

In front of a TV camera, behind a lectern, my mind sometimes wanders to those who didn't understand me. Twenty-five teenage faces reappear, blue eyes, orthodontic braces, perfect teeth, freckles, hollow cheeks, full cheeks, sun-bleached hair, knee-length skirts, slender legs, Goffredo Mameli high school, Parioli, Rome. Taken at the basketball court, the class photo showing the twenty-five kids, us, who from year to year – as we take out the photos, arrange them in chronological order – are transformed, reaching the adult form of the last photo.

Hey you there – the cry comes from a distance of years – remember the day I walked into class with my koala backpack? I came from the province (Maremma), heavily made-up, unfashionable, that's me.

Thirty years pass, and the last girl at the top left of the photo shifts her position. A centripetal force sweeps her to center stage, the light on her, and the rest of you in shadow.

How does one become a writer? they ask from the audience. Sacrifice, dedication, I respond – the camera goes on filming. I add: Along with a little selfishness, which this profession often requires of you. Family, for example, I certainly could have spent more time with my daughter – and this, and this alone, is the only thing I'm being sincere about.

Then I revert to lying again. What an amazing city, I can't wait to come back, I'll be back, I promise, jabbering on and on.

Fake, fake, fake. I can't wait to get out of there.

Look at me, all dressed up in a coat that's too light, crossing the deserted piazza on a subzero night, rewinding the scarf the wind loosens over and over again. Here I am in the hotel room, looking out the window at a valley with a light down below, maybe a sports stadium from which youthful shouts can be heard. They must be having a training session. If you could only see me, dear readers, if you could see me now in my polar fleece pajamas, would you still love me?

Becoming successful, I've had to put people off.

Relatives and friends now suddenly demanding.

People I've never seen before claiming to be second cousins, or an uncle.

Strangers who compliment me on the moving story in which they saw themselves and then conclude: I'd like to tell you personally about my childhood.

Old schoolmates. Right, the boys from Goffredo Mameli high school, section C, are back.

In their beds, in the form of aroused males, I see them, all the ones who didn't love me, embossing a mark on my fragile person. So then: aren't they to blame, those kids, those former schoolmates, isn't the infidelity their fault, the fact that I started cheating on my husband? Doesn't the adult you are depend on adolescence?

"I heard it's snowing," a text pops up on the phone.

Huddled under the blankets, the youthful shouts in the distance gone, I text back: "At the moment no snow."

And I feel like adding: come and get me. Regardless of who the sender is, addressed to anybody who takes pity on for me, male, female, daughter, lover: we are still young, so young. All this affection wasted, so much affection lost down here. Take me away (and here I imagine a male).

Go ahead and think that this story began the day a married man in bed asked me "Would you leave your husband for me?" You can think it, you'd be wrong.

Morning – daylight illuminates the salvage yard. Boundless valley, youthful shouts, my ass! In this desolation the only racket is the crunch of sheet metal from the chop shop.

And no, it didn't snow. No snow in Cagliari. You may wonder why the renowned writer, the chestnut blonde woman with the provided wardrobe, is not in New York, in Paris, but in Cagliari.

In recent years – three, to be exact, since the book's publication – I have traveled around Italy exerting my sedentary nature in order to stay in the limelight. The number of phone calls I didn't answer confirmed that it was a prominent role, as did the inbox stuffed with invitations. People from the past –I emphasize again. Okay, so only one of my former schoolmates reappeared, that was enough. I would make that one count for all of them.

In October – keep in mind, it's now December – Federica (whose last name I won't mention because she's a real person) re-entered my life with a long message in which she expressed her joy at having found me, how she'd thought about me over the years. How proud she was to read about my success, to see what an important person I'd become, furthermore she always knew that I was special.

A brief mention of her dead mother, of her father who reads my features in the papers – he too is proud of me! He's pushing ninety, full of aches and pains, poor man, his life was not an easy one.

If I were twenty years old. If success had come at twenty, I would have turned to drink, drugs, I would have deceived men, using them for short periods in order to inflate my vanity. Young males would have chased after me. All of them wanting me.

Instead I'm forty-seven and the only ones who look at me are fifty-year-olds struggling with parents at the end of life, if not dead. Men with bursitis of the elbow and stiff backs, divorced, dissatisfied adults, determined to create a new life, have children in their fifties. On psychotherapeutic drugs, they're as stressed as I am when I find I'm menstruating. A cycle out of whack, I think, seeing the stain. No big deal, just a little blood, far be it from me to write the history of my menses, all you have to know is that I've never kept track of them. Caught off guard every time, I stain the sheets, the chairs. Going back in time I hear my mother's voice again: like an animal, she says. However, we are talking about a simple woman, despite a degree in Medicine. Speaking of blood, plebeian blood flows in her veins: she doesn't throw away leftovers, she makes the bed herself. And it was during that time, my high school days, after we'd moved to Rome, that my shame exploded: because it was my luck to have an unsuitable mother, so

different from the other mothers that I was led to tell her: my friends are coming over, stay in your room.

You who don't have a fur coat (you have one, but you don't wear it), who don't wear jewelry (which you really don't have, you sold it – I'll find out after your death). You who one day, with your missing teeth – no use swearing it was an oversight, you did it intentionally –, that day, with the gap of missing teeth that you insist you can't replace with implants, you don't have the money, you say, that day you open the door to the two girls who ask for me, and opening your mouth wide, you say: she's not here.

One of the two is called Federica, and she will go around saying that you, Mama, are a bag lady.

It's Federica, therefore, with whom I have the most accounts to settle, it's her I decide to respond to when her message comes in October.

All this took place two months ago, with me planning to take my time to respond, maybe after further unanswered attempts on her part. How does it feel to be ignored, girlfriend?

An examination of my conscience suggests that my whole life can be read in light of a desire for revenge. Every relationship, at home and elsewhere, took the form of a wrong to be redressed. After all, what else would you call the novel that made me famous if not a vendetta against my dead parents? And against myself – if only you detractors were capable of grasping metaphors. Try harder.

Not that everything is a metaphor. The salvage yard my room overlooks isn't, this city, Cagliari, isn't, I'm not either as, barely awake, I gather my personal belongings to put back in the rolling wheelie. Even less so is the person who keeps texting me.

“Should I come and pick you up at the airport?”

“I have an interview,” I text back.

As an established writer, I write for various newspapers, in particular a national daily for which I interview figures such as actors, and intellectuals. Often it is the personalities themselves who ask for me.

I made it – I say to my former schoolmates, in an interior dialogue that has gone on for years, in a fantasy that has me picture them rich, arrogant.

An aggregate of tamed hormones, nothing in them was out of control, their appetites, as well as their desires, so that they desired one another in an instinctive defense of the pedigree.

It's you I talk to, constantly, in my imagination, my dreams – I dream of you, you selfish little brats, how destructive you were in your inability to foresee the consequences of your actions, acting without thinking, laughing blithely.

Some might argue that it's been too many years, too long to still hold grudges.

So then I – in my imagination still – straighten my shoulders, clear my voice, and say no. Impossible to forget, I pronounce. How to erase the moment when running for class representative against two social pariahs (Ciriello from Naples, diabetic Curcio), certain that I would win, not a single “x” appeared on the blackboard next to my name?

When would the memory of me on the steps of the sixteenth-century villa fade, me in a long dress waiting to welcome the guests to celebrate my eighteenth birthday, when no one shows up. When would the wound heal? (Actually a few people did show up, fifteen or twenty out of the two hundred who'd been invited; the villa seemed deserted, and there I was in the gardens, in the salons, fat.)

There is a photo of me, Federica, Livia, and Simona. Behind us Massimo, and a blond boy whose name I don't remember.

We are sixteen years old, Livia seventeen. It must be a month before she disappeared, the last photo of Livia before her disappearance.

But let's focus on me, the me to Federica's left.

Who am I at the time? A teenager from the provinces who moved to the city because of her parents' separation. Father a local notable (lawyer, doctor, it doesn't much matter), mother a do-nothing.

Who am I in that neighborhood school attended by children of professionals? Who if not an overweight, heavily made-up girl, sad and frightened and complex-ridden, ridiculed and angry, so angry that she screams: I'm going to school, and I'm going to slay them, Mama! If the internet had existed at the time, if bullying had been labeled, I would have ended up in juvie, or a rehab institution, instead of being the ungainly individual who picks up the phone and dials a number: you don't know me, I love you, she says. Or even: your son is a druggie. Anonymous phone calls. Insults, declarations of love into the receiver.

And for a time the person alongside me is Federica. Ashamed of my house (we lived with my grandmother like poor people, those from the South), I would go to her place.

Lying on the blue carpet in her room, Federica would sigh: sometimes I feel like running away to another part of the world, like Alaska.

Days, months. We two shut away in that room.

Was this adolescence? The films portrayed something different: where was the sex you practiced in cars? And the attempted suicides thwarted by lovers? Xanax tablets swallowed by the bottlesful, d cuts on the arms? Where were the dangers of being killed, of being raped in underpasses, of being sexually molested by a family member; where were the morning-after pills (non-existent at the time)? Where were all the drugs you promised us? When do boys enter this story of ours?

Two overweight teen girls who talked behind closed doors, endured the isolation. Two teenagers, overweight but defiant, who lying on the same carpet where they moan and groan, rally: if life sucks for us, let it suck for others too.

And so they swoop into Livia's room, find the invitation among the many others, and ascertain the location of the party.

Look for the Club's phone number in the directory.

Pick up the receiver, dial the number: there's a bomb, evacuate at once!

Close your eyes on the blue carpet, picture the scene: individuals crowding towards the exit, the mounting screams. People stumbling, falling. Help, the childlike little voices implore, and we – on the blue carpet, floating –, we feel smug at having unmasked you, you cowards.

These are the scenes of disaster that take shape in our minds, sadistic yet harmless in that nothing ever happens, never anything, for our entire adolescence, while the parties to which we are not invited go on.

Nothing ever comes of our attempts at rebellion (if Columbine had already happened, if there had already been a trailblazer, that's all it would have taken to set us off, frustrated as we are, ready to explode, give us a gun, a bomb).

On the blue carpet, arms linked, we feel we're on an equal footing, at least between us. Pariahs in the same way.

And yet, we're different, Federica – I can't tell you how often I think about tomorrow – you won't experience exclusion, because you are the daughter of friends, friends of friends, if not relatives; you can join exclusive clubs, especially the Circolo della Caccia, the Hunt Society that I'm denied access to, and sit on sofas, and while silent – allowing yourself to keep silent! – are still one of them. In my imagination I leap to my feet: don't claim to be me – I point my finger –, you with a mother who has all her teeth, not like mine, forced to sell her Etruscan gold jewelry because my father won't give her any money, he left us poor, overnight we're poor, what do you know about poverty, deprivation, an uncertain future, Federica.

On the carpet in your room I want to be you, give me your hand.

For sure we were in the same category of humanity when the door opened, and Livia burst in.

At the sight of the blond goddess we fall silent – and it is the most vivid memory of the period of friendship with Federica, of the days spent at her place. The appearance, suddenly, of her sister.

The door opens after the party we pointlessly sabotaged (having discarded the bomb idea, we opted for a more moderate: good evening, the birthday girl's mother has died, would you please inform the young lady?).

To be accurate, the door opens the following morning, and Livia appears, demanding not to be disturbed, she didn't get home until dawn, but then the phone rings, and she, blond as sunlight and exhausted, says: I'm not here for anyone.

No one at all? Federica asks.

But Livia has already disappeared into her room, sunny days, starlit nights, loving admirers, how can anything bad ever happen to her.

Hello, Federica answers the phone.

It's Massimo, is Livia there?, asks the voice on the other end.

Long legs, narrow hips, it wasn't hours of dance classes or sports that forged that perfect body. All nature's doing, breasts included.

There she is still, with that shapely figure. Livia.

Perfect breasts, we said. No cotton, no socks – we were the ones who stuffed our bras with socks. The swelling flesh that quivered every time she moved was as real for her, for the world, as it was painful for us who had just begun to bloom, with tiny breasts, asymmetrical in my case, so asymmetrical as to require camouflage: oversize sweaters. Developing creatures, lopsided buds hopeful of adjustment (if they didn't even out with growth – the endocrinologist had said – an operation would be required. And I, naked, trying to cover myself with my arms, keep my eyes glued to the floor so as not to see that malformed thing in the mirror).

Branded, we two.

That's what we were compared to Livia, and what she left behind only reminded us of the difference. Blond hair in the sink, tampons left for the eyes of adolescents who used sanitary pads, thanks to idle talk: tampons deflower you.

All we had to do was enter the shared bathroom, or her room, poke through her things, or pick up an object touched by her to remind us that we were secondary figures. If someone had made a film, we would have been the walk-ons in Livia's magnificent life. Picture the leading lady running on a beach, imagine her on a swing, hair in the wind, or pirouetting on an ice rink.

No one at that time could have predicted how things would actually turn out, that there would be a final scene. Back then, if you'd wanted to think about the end of Livia's youth, you would have imagined marriage. Doves, rose petals.

But no: in this story, in this true story, no petals float down, no doves take flight to mark the beginning of a new life.

In my extremely personal, posthumous reconstruction, as I described it to anyone who asked about that night, my last image of Livia is in a very bright light. Who knows what it was for the others. Sister, parents, friends, who knows what image they retained of her. It would not have been the same for everyone.

I close my eyes: from that time on, whenever I close my eyes, Livia is in the light, and a moment later, she isn't. A cautionary sign that beautiful things do not last long, think butterflies. Take butterflies.

On her last day as a butterfly, Livia emerges from the light. She steps out of the light and wraps herself in a towel.

Federica tells her that she should deal with Massimo herself, she's not her secretary.

Livia sighs. Disappears.

Ignoring the dermatologist who had forbidden her to use the sun lamp, Livia had had them give her a tanning bed. Her skin was delicate, the UVA rays would damage it, and increase the risk of speeding up the aging process. Did she want to look like she was in her thirties? If she wanted to keep her youthful looks for a long time, she should limit her exposure to the sun, and even then only with total protection.

At the time, however, the word aging sounded as far-removed as a lunar landing, nuclear war. And so, Livia did not follow the doctor's instructions. Besides: do you know that it meant to be the only one in the school to own such a thing? A few had facial tanners, certainly not a sun bed, the exclusive prerogative of beauty spas. Her friends begged her to let them use it, she consented. Rarely though, wanting to be the only one with a tan in all seasons.

In actuality, if ever there was a threat to her beauty, it was the tanning bed, programmed for an hour, thirty minutes, twenty, another ten, a final ten.

Often she burned her skin, which peeled off to expose raw flesh, the sight of which made her mother frantic: you've disfigured yourself!

Reflecting on it today, it foreshadowed the future.

Livia who gambled with her good fortune, who ruined herself and was born again more beautiful, eternally beautiful, Livia who went through fire, showing it in our faces, the same fire that left us branded (after another year, no, the breasts did not even out, in fact, the right one had grown. What am I going to do? I shouted at my mother. I'm a monster, a freak).

When I think back to Livia, all the times I've thought about her over the years, I see her emerge from the tanning bed, in what for me is the final scene.

The mind travels back, farther back, everything lights up.

Federica opens the door of her room. It's Massimo, she announces.

Tell him I'm not here.

I told him you're here.

The sun bed radiates light like a space capsule.

Come out!

The hatch rises, and Livia is silhouetted against the luminescent glow. In my memory – there I am, behind Federica – she is naked, top and bottom, where a blond bush is conspicuous (further evidence of the rule that the children of the wealthy are blond; here the exceptional children of the wealthy are even blond between their legs).

And so, on her last day as a butterfly, Livia steps out of the tanning bed, picks up the towel, annoyed, and wraps it around her. She sighs. In my mind it is after that moment that traces of her are lost. What became of her, many will wonder. What happened to the blond girl. We weep, we pray.

Translator's note: The phrase "skin deep," in the sense of not rigorous or lasting in impression, was first used by Sir Thomas Overbury in his poem "A Wife" (1613): "And all the carnall beauty of my wife, / Is but skin-deep...".