

The Abundance By Sarah Shun-lien Bynum

When Dierdra pulls the apparatus from its box, we gasp. Translucent, gelatinous, slick, vaguely pink, it quivers in the air as she holds it up for inspection. "Gather-the-Girls," says Dierdra cheerfully, reading from the packaging. It is an adhesive strapless bra. It is both boosting and sweatproof. It is what Dierdra plans to wear under her clothes to our friend's wedding, for which we girls have gathered in New York.

At age 36, we are not really girls anymore. But we were when we first became friends, and back then we never would have referred to our breasts as "girls": We were too serious, too grateful, to turn potential objects of desire into a joke. From the money we made scooping ice cream and serving burgers and bagging groceries, we spent an inordinate amount on beautiful bras. Breasts demanded respectful attention,

harbingers as they were of sex and love, the two things we thought we wanted most, and probably in that order.

We laugh and shriek as Dierdra emerges from the bathroom in her bridesmaid dress, the "girls" on astonishing display. It seems impossible that such an abundance of breast could be spilling forth without breaking free. Her breasts look glorious, but also faintly alarming. "Gorgeous!" we exclaim, then go searching through our suitcases for a nice wrap or scarf to cover her up.

When did this sense of modesty set in? As teenagers, our wardrobe philosophy erred on the side of brevity. Skirts were worn short, tops low-cut. The look was purely practical: a strategy of drawing attention to one's more reliable physical assets (legs, breasts) while obscuring other disappointing and unpredictable features (frizzy hair, thick waist, bad skin). Even as we began to outgrow, or grow into, our

troublesome bodies, we still preferred a plunging neckline out of habit.

So why, after 20 years of blithe exposure, do we now catch ourselves hesitating in front of mirrors, feeling something like doubt? We find it hard to look at our breasts in the same gleeful way we used to. If to talk about them once meant to talk of demi-cups and stretch lace, now we have conversations about middle-of-the-night feedings. If once we piled into dressing rooms, stripped off our shirts, and moaned about excesses or deficiencies in size, now we leave messages on each other's cell phones about radiation treatments and white-blood-cell counts and tamoxifen. We are here for a wedding in New York City, but we cannot stop thinking that the last time we gathered was at a Quaker meeting house in Maine, at the service for Dierdra's mother, who did not survive cancer. *(continued on page 110)*

My bra had foam triangles that looked like pillows from a seedy doll motel.

Tough Luck By Aviya Kushner

An ultrabusty relative once looked at me and said, "Too bad you weren't lucky enough to inherit my breasts." I was about 15 years old, and my breasts and I had a long way to go. But in the years since, I have replayed that comment in my head, and slowly realized that all breasts are basically lucky. We inherit breasts, along with height, eye color, and relatives. Sure, we can diet and they get smaller, get pregnant and they get bigger, or strap on a \$150 bra made of red lace from France, but mostly, we have as much control over our God-given breasts as we do over our blunter family members, or the weather: not much.

I have always been happy with my breasts, though they probably came from the other side of my family, and while I am partial to V-neck shirts, I've never thought my breasts had an effect on my life. But when this relative was 15, an hourglass fig-

ure could mean survival: a rare job during the Depression ushering at a movie theater, where she lied about her age, no doubt helped by her curvaceous shape. That salary saved the family home—lucky indeed.

But was it all due to a pair of lucky breasts? Maybe. As long as I knew her, she liked to play them up, and she always noticed what other women's bodies looked like. In conversation, she would refer to acquaintances as "big on top," or my personal favorite, "lucky in the figure."

In time, I noticed some sadness under those phrases, and some wistfulness in her stories—especially the usherette story. That job meant she had to drop out of high school. It meant that later, she had to rely on a man to support her financially. It meant that it mattered to her whether other people saw her breasts as lucky. And so she told tales of her dresses and shoes and their effect on men: I heard all about

candy and flowers delivered to her in the '30s. She believed that looking a certain way spelled luck, at least sometimes.

I never asked her what she meant by "lucky breasts" exactly, and it's too late to do that now. But maybe she was trying to say: "I hope you won't need my kind of figure to be lucky."

And I haven't. I've never had to use my looks to get a job, although, when I was a teenager, a stranger once offered me cash for sex when I was standing outside of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Another time, another stranger tried to hire me to be a Hebrew-language phone-sex operator.

My relative got a lot out of her figure: money for her mortgage, food for her parents, a marriage, a family. And I was able to listen to her tell her life story, noticing, each time, the great distance between her life at 15 and mine, and feeling lucky that for me, breasts are not all that important. ♦