BEWARE THE BEARDED WOMAN:
FREAKS, THE FEMALE BODY, AND NON-RECOGNITION

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the concept of recognizable and non-recognizable bodies through examining representations of female freaks in literature. Bodies must be recognizable in order to be considered human, yet the non-recognizable body or freakish body offers alternate possibilities of embodiment that are usually overlooked. This thesis focuses on what happens when the non-recognizable female freak is in the public gaze and the gaze among intimates. Both of these spaces are ambivalent spaces for the female freak in which she finds simultaneous danger and power, identification and manipulation.

In these texts the public space is one in which the female freak may find both economic and erotic power, yet allowing her body to be seen puts her in danger from the seer. The female freak cannot control the gaze of the audience, which can lead to her body being objectified, or risk physical harm. In more intimate spaces in which the female freak is among family and friends, her body may be recognizable because she is with people who are similarly embodied, but she may also be in danger from intimates who wish to dictate what she can and cannot do with her body. The intimate space is also the space in which the female freak can shape her own body and define her own aesthetic and personal erotic.

The literary texts analyzed in this thesis present the freakish female body in a new light, and ask the reader to question her definitions of freakish and normal. The texts suggest alternate ways of being embodied and of looking at bodies that are considered non-recognizable, suggesting that we need to conceive of new ways of conceptualizing bodily difference.
Nobody realizes that some people expend tremendous energy merely to be normal.

- Albert Camus

The body is a sacred garment.

- Martha Graham
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I. INTRODUCTION

Freaks. We still think of them in terms of the sideshow, bearded women and giantesses, fat ladies and half women/half men with bodies split neatly down the middle, one side clad in an evening gown, the other in a tux. We confine freaks to the midway of the 1920s and 30s, isolating them spatially and chronologically as relics of the past. We do not consider how the fear and fascination with the bearded woman, for example, lives on in the way contemporary American women regard their facial hair. Yet as Sandra Lee Bartky writes, to be thought of as “normal,” a woman must have skin that is, “soft, supple, hairless, and smooth; ideally, it should betray no sign of wear, experience, age, or deep thought. Hair must be removed not only from the face but from large surfaces of the body” (136). Women with “moustaches,” dark hairs above their upper lip, are considered “freakish,” even though few people may use that exact term. The process of hair removal is so ingrained in our culture that we rarely bother to ask what threat that slight moustache fuzz seems to pose, how it recalls the bearded woman. We do not realize that freaks are not simply creatures of the past, but constructions that still influence notions of the female body.

In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Bulter examines how certain bodies are considered “legible,” meaning recognizably human, and some bodies are considered “illegible,” or not recognizably human. These standards, she writes, are dictated by a set of norms that form the “regime of truth” for a society and set up a framework for what is and is not a “recognizable form of being.” Beings that are not recognizable under these norms include freaks such as the bearded woman that cannot be “read” as one gender or the other. Butler writes that the norms that classify bodies as human or non-human can be ruptured, the regime of truth can be questioned, but this is a dangerous action. Those who question the norms risk being classified as
non-recognizable and, therefore, inhuman (22-24). In this thesis I suggest that the freak is a useful site for further investigating Butler’s notion of recognizable and non-recognizable bodies, and for examining how the body must be maintained to meet norms and thereby be recognizable. In examining freakish bodies, we can explore both the possibilities of rupturing norms and the ambivalent nature of non-recognition, how it can be a site of both power and imprisonment.

Using the freakish body to investigate recognizability is appropriate because, by definition, the freakish body is a body of spectacle, a body that is meant to be seen and displayed, and it is only in being seen that bodies have chance to challenge norms and the standards of recognizability. The freakish body is a body that crosses borders, not only ones between genders, but between individuals and species. This means it is a threat to the normative framework and has the potential to create a rupture. The freak body is also useful in investigating recognizability because it suggests the many alterations a body must undergo to fit within the framework of the norm and be considered recognizable. Exploring the body of the female freak is valuable in this task because, within a patriarchy, women are always teetering on the edge of recognizability and/or freakness.

In my thesis, I suggest that the freak needs to be examined in the context of recognizable and unrecognizable bodies, and that freakishness/non-recognition can be empowering as opposed to limiting. I analyze six contemporary literary texts that investigate aspects of the freakish female body. These texts include Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love*, Elizabeth McCracken’s “It’s Bad Luck to Die,” and Hollis Seamon’s “The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe,” along with three of my own works of short fiction: “Ears,” “Mr. Chicken,” and “Beard.” These texts are useful in that they examine the body of the freakish female in a contemporary context and explore different ways of thinking about what it means to be embodied, the ambivalent nature of
recognizability and non-recognizability, and the potential of the non-recognizable to create ruptures in the normative framework.
II. THE HISTORY AND THE TERMS

The body of the freak is an ambivalent body. As Elizabeth Grosz writes, “Freaks cross the borders that divide the subject from all ambiguities, interconnections, and reciprocal classifications, outside of or beyond the human. They imperil the very definitions we use to classify humans, identities, and sexes […] boundaries dividing self from otherness” (57). The freak can also be an object of both fear and desire, one that floats between the recognizable and non-recognizable.

While it might not be apparent that the idea of freakishness affects how individuals in American mass culture perceive their bodies, examples from the media demonstrate otherwise. These include advertisements and commercials for makeup, blemish control products, shaving products, and diet products and pills. Many of these commercials also include ominous before-and-after pictures in which the consumer can see how the “freak” body has been changed into one that fits within “norm” standards. Pictures of obese women wearing bikinis are paired with pictures of slim women who took a certain diet drug. Faces of women who have eczema are shown beside pictures of clear-faced woman who have used a blemish cream. This media climate suggests that bodies are in constant danger of being unrecognizable, and therefore non-human and abject.

Yet the freakish body is important and powerful precisely because it is the non-recognizable body, the abject body that must be denied because it cannot be culturally acceptable. Julia Kristeva defines such bodies as ones that “[lie] outside, beyond the set, and [does] not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game, and yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease to challenge its master” (2). She further writes that the abject is what “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Women
are often associated with both the freakish and the abject, as the female body symbolizes an “indifference to limits” including menstruation, lactation, and pregnancy (Shildrick 31). The female freakish body, then, becomes an especially powerful symbol of the disobedient body, the body that crosses boundaries, that has excesses, and, as Kristeva writes, cannot be ignored because of the rift it creates. This body has the potential not only to confine women, but to empower them through questioning the norm, disturbing order, and suggesting other ways that bodies can exist, alternate forms of embodiment.

Yet, as Butler states, while normative standards do not dictate exactly how individuals can shape their bodies, they do arrange a framework in which certain bodies are considered “recognizable” and human, and other bodies are not (22). In the current framework that exists within American mass culture, there is a relatively thin definition of what is considered a “normal” and recognizable body and what is not, as well as penchant for measuring levels of normality. According to Michael Warner, the idea of being “normal” was not much of a concern “until the spread of statistics in the nineteenth century. Now [people] are surrounded by numbers that tell them what normal is […] constantly bombarded by images of statistical populations and their norms […] invited to make an implicit comparison between themselves and the mass of other bodies” (53-54). The norm is a construction that forces a comparison, encourages one to look at herself and others and reassure herself that she “fits in.”

In contrast, the freakish and non-recognizable body serves a cultural purpose outside the normative framework as a space for uncertainties, a space in which to place people whom a society fears, wants to control, and wants to classify as non-recognizable and non-human. As Rosemary Garland Thompson writes, freak bodies “function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment […] the monstrous body exists in
societies to be exploited for someone else’s purposes” (2). The freakish body draws attention to itself within a culture, and has multiple functions both as an object of longing and hatred. The freak can serve as a site of taboo sexual desire, while at the same time trapping those “freakish” individuals in a lower social status and allowing others to maintain a privileged “normal” position.

Academics such as Elizabeth Grosz, Rosemary Thompson, and Rose Weitz have written about historical comparisons between the female body and the freakish body. They argue that very often in western history, women’s bodies have been regarded as freakish and not recognizably human, another excuse used to keep women in a position of lesser social status. Even though we are considering historical facts and conditions, it is important to note that women’s bodies are often still regarded in this manner today.

Weitz cites the early ideas of Aristotle who believed that female babies were male babies whose bodies did not contain enough heat, so their genitalia did not develop properly. These beliefs about women’s bodies “formed the basis for ‘scientific’ discussion of this topic in the west from the fourth century BC through the eighteenth century” (3). While men’s bodies were considered normal, the “standard” recognizable body, women were, by definition, less recognizable and less human.

Notions of recognizability and non-recognizability are also present in the American freak show in the 1800’s and early 1900’s. The freak show was a space in which spectators could validate that their own bodies fit into the “norm” and were therefore human and superior to the non-recognizable, non-human freaks. As Rosemary Garland Thompson writes, the freak show was instrumental in shaping the thought processes of those who viewed the freaks because the show “united and validated the disparate throng positioned as viewers,” erasing their differences
and raising them all above the level of the freak. Thompson writes that as members of the audience juxtaposed their bodies with the freak body, they were able to validate their superior social status, and as such these citizens were not led to question either their privileged position or the social system that bestowed it upon them (10). This phenomenon persists today, as individuals whose bodies are recognizable within a culture bodies are still invested in maintaining their version of normality and the social structures that support it. They have no reason to change that ideology and risk losing power, and so maintain a system in which women’s bodies are always at the edge of freakishness and non-recognizability.

Yet the standards of recognizability and non-recognizability, of freakish and normal, have changed over time. What has not changed is the presence of these categories and the fact that they play a role in determining social status. For example, Rachel Adams writes that in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, tattooed women were being displayed in freak shows, along with women with very long fingernails, women with very long hair, and women who wore pants (Sideshow 4-5). Outside of the sideshow, women who were calling for social change and suggesting that females were intelligent enough to have the right to vote were also decried as freaks. Participants in the women’s suffrage movement were labeled unsexed, psychologically and physically deformed, and the movement itself was described as a freak show of sorts (Peterson 292). Labeling the suffragists as freaks served a purpose in branding them as inhuman in both mind and body. The fact that today we do not question the right of women to vote or wear pants suggests that the framework established by normative standards does indeed shift over time, but often that shift is gradual and piecemeal. For example, while there are many social occasions during which it is acceptable for women to wear pants, during some formal occasions women are often expected to wear skirts or dresses.
Kathryn Pauly Morgan suggests that another shift is occurring in the normative framework in the way plastic surgery is redefining how people conceive of the “normal.” She states that there is a danger in these procedures becoming so pervasive as to create new appearances “that are then regarded as ‘the real’” (165). Other shifts in the normative framework have also been promoted by the pervasiveness and promotion of razors, depilatory creams, hair dyes, and makeup. The “normal” pleasing body seen in women’s magazines is a drastically altered body that has been shaved and painted and prodded into place, and ultimately implies that alteration is the only way to a “normal,” recognizable, and human body.

The ways in which bodily representation in the media has the potential to shape appearance standards returns us to Michael Warner’s suggestion that individuals are encouraged to compare their bodies to other bodies and strive to achieve “normality.” In American mass culture, constant scrutiny of one’s own body and the bodies of others is expected, so the body must be constantly maintained to remain within the bounds of the norm. This pressure is felt quite strongly by women, who are expecting men to evaluate their bodies. Worry over that scrutiny changes how women conceive of their bodies, and enhances their fear of being considered unrecognizable and “freakish” by the male gaze.

Laura Mulvey writes of how this male gaze “projects its fantasy onto the female figure […] in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (47-48). Yet, while women are subject to the gaze as sexual objects, men do not experience that same level of scrutiny. Mulvey writes, “According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist
While it can be argued that, counter to Mulvey’s assertion, men are becoming the object of women’s sexual gaze more often and are subjecting themselves to similar forms of body shaping, most of her argument holds true in that the pressures each gender faces are not the same—women are still at greater risk of being labeled non-recognizable and freakish.

Also important to the ways in which women perceive their bodies is Foucault’s panopticon, another form of the gaze. The panoptic structure suggests that bodies are always being watched and evaluated, and thus must be constantly controlled to fit within the norms of bodily appearance. The panopticon is a ring-shaped prison with individual cells that circle a watchtower. A guard is inside the tower, and there are blinds all around, so the prisoners know they are being monitored, but because of the blinds they are never sure when. As a result of this uncertainty, the prisoners assume they are always being watched and control their own behavior. Foucault writes that, once the prisoners have internalized the panoptic structure, “the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound, and permanent its effects” (201-202). The more deeply the panopticon is internalized by the prisoners, the stronger its effects, and the lesser the need for actual guards.

While this system is not a perfect analogy to why women monitor their bodies, there are strong comparisons we can draw. Women can be lead to conceive of their bodies in different ways because of the fear of surveillance, disembodied surveillance in particular. They are never sure when their bodies are being watched. The prospect of this gaze becomes even more fearsome than in a strict panoptic structure, however, because it does not come from a single guard but from multiple points. Women must always have control over how their bodies look and how they are acting. They must always be recognizable.
In American mass culture, the female freak also functions as part of an ideology in which freaks can be objects of desire (albeit hidden), but are more often objects of fear and derision. The freak body is identified in a manner similar to Althusser’s idea of hailing. Althusser defines hailing as putting ideology into practice, meaning that the subject of the ideology acknowledges and obeys the ideological structure (174). If a woman with a beard and woman without a beard were to see each other in the sideshow, the beardless woman would likely have a physical or emotional reaction to the bearded woman. Maybe she would touch her upper lip and think about going out to buy a wax treatment. Maybe she would just stop and stare. She knows that she fits within the bounds of the norm, that she has a recognizable body, and that the bearded woman does not. She recognizes that an ideology that has constructed an idea of freakishness exists, and that it separates their bodies into two categories. The self is recognizable and human. The other, in this case the freak, is non-recognizable and non-human.

Non-recognizability can be a dangerous space for women, a space in which they are treated as lesser beings. At the same time, the texts I examine explore how the freakish body can suggest different ways of being embodied. They portray the non-recognizable body as an ambivalent body, and suggest ways in which non-recognition can be empowering, as opposed to a space that merely confines women.
III. THE FREAKED FICTIONS

The literary texts I examine present alternative views of the female body and the freakish body through the eyes of first-person female freak narrators.

*Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn is a novel about the Binewskis, a family of freaks that live and work in a carnival. The novel focuses especially on the relationships between Olympia, the narrator who is a hunchback albino dwarf, and her family members, especially her daughter Miranda, an exotic dancer who has a tail. “The Strange History of Suzanne LaFlesche” by Hollis Seamon is about Suzanne, a Weight Watchers success story who decides that she does not like being thin and wants to have her formerly fat body back. “It’s Bad Luck to Die” by Elizabeth McCracken is the story of a woman named Lois who is lovingly tattooed by her husband Tiny during their two decades of marriage, much to the chagrin of her fashion plate mother. My stories include “Ears” (Appendix A) about a woman with four ears who, for economic reasons, becomes a logo for the tattoo parlor where she works; “Mr. Chicken” (Appendix B) about a “closeted” bearded woman who manages a fast food restaurant and stops shaving her facial hair in the hopes of ridding her restaurant of a particularly annoying customer; and “Beard” (Appendix C) about a bearded woman and her twelve-year-old daughter, Kimber, who she encourages not to shave when Kimber starts growing a moustache.

Of these texts, *Geek Love* is the most fantastic in terms of plot, involving telekinesis, levitation, and several other occurrences that situate it as a magically real work of fiction. Within the text, the fantastic becomes a tool to imply that what is commonly regarded as the real and the norm are not static. As Jean-Paul Durix suggests, in using the magical real and instituting a new reality, writers can suggest that reality is a changing entity (81). One example of this in *Geek Love* is Miranda’s tail. While many people are in fact born with small tail-like
structures protruding from their rear, Miranda’s is described playfully as a “thin, curling that that jutted out from the end of her spine and bounced just above her round buttocks,” exaggerating it enough to situate the tail it in the realm of the fantastic (17).

While the other stories present a more realistic world, one free of the fantastic, all of the texts are written with a comic attitude and first-person narrators who have a wry sensibility. Like the magical real, humor is used as a tool in these texts to suggest the changing nature of the norm, and the comic becomes a means to defamiliarize the body, the female body in particular, through language. In defamiliarizing the body, the texts present bodies that the reader assumes are known and familiar to her, but the authors describe these bodies in language that makes them seem new and strange, language that runs counter to previous assumptions and forces the reader to re-see the body.

The texts often defamiliarize by using inversion, presenting the normal as freakish and the freakish as normal, employing the comic and ironic voices of the narrator characters to present the body in a unique and nuanced light. For example, Hollis Seamon uses Suzanne’s character to defamiliarize the fat body, describing it in lush and sensual terms, while describing the thin body in language that makes it seem deficient. Suzanne’s character describes the body of Janet, one of the Weight Watchers coordinators, in such a manner. When Suzanne holds Janet’s hand while the two are talking, she “[tries] not to be scared by its frailty, her bones so hard in my soft palm” and Janet’s legs are “so small they made me want to weep” (216). The text portrays the fat body as having a certain power that thin people do not have, and the thin body as being one that can be easily dismissed. Suzanne’s character relates that Janet “hated touching me. She was afraid of my flesh. Afraid that her tiny bony little hand would be pulled in, somehow, absorbed and lost” (220). When Suzanne is gaining weight, Seamon depicts the
process in lush terms: “I could feel the old familiar flesh gathering about my ribs and thighs; my breasts were already straining against the new lace C-cup bra I had bought for them just a few months before […] I was getting rich, again” (215). While the text takes a comic attitude towards the fat and thin body, it also defamiliarizes the fat body through implying a bodily richness that expresses itself on many levels. There is a sensuous richness in the food that is consumed to achieve girth, a tactile richness in the feel of the body rubbing against clothing, and a sensual richness in using the body as an object to achieve sexual pleasure. As Wendy Russo writes, weight is also considered beautiful in many cultures since it demonstrates one’s economic ability to eat well (24). The idea of richness, then, serves to recall these cultural traditions in which girth is a sign of wealth.

Similarly, in “It’s Bad Luck to Die,” McCracken defamiliarizes the normalizing practice of makeup application in a comic manner, as an act that makes Lois’s body appear freakish. Lois’s character says that “makeup hated me; mascara blacked my eyes, lipstick founds its way onto my teeth and chin” (65). It is only when she begins to be tattooed, a practice that does not fit into the boundaries of the norm, that she beings to feel better about her body. McCracken describes Lois as only being interested in real tattoos, and having no desire for anything that is merely temporary. When her husband is drawing on her thigh with a pen, Lois has a book to read because she “couldn’t get interested in anything that wasn’t permanent” (68). McCracken humorously re-imagines the practice of makeup application as something that makes the face seem painted and clownish, not at all sexual or desirable. It is presented as a ritual that is more of a hassle than it’s worth, especially since the application must be repeated perfectly day after day. In contrast, the text suggests a certain practicality and logic to marking the body in a way that is permanent and gives it meaning.
Another episode of defamiliarization occurs in the story “Beard,” in which the text imagines practical and cosmetic uses for facial hair on women. The bearded woman in the story, who is also a hairstylist, enjoys having a beard in similar ways to how men enjoy having beards, for practical and cosmetic purposes. Her character says “a beard keeps your face warmer in the winter, keeps the mosquitoes off in the summer. The hair is nice and silky and you can dye it or braid it or trim and shape it” (100). This is a comic moment because her attitude is unexpected and unconventional, yet the text is also suggests the possibility of facial hair as an enhancement for women as well as men, something that the bearded woman’s character chooses to grow because she likes the way it looks and she enjoys shaping it.

The texts suggest that the gaze functions on two different levels, the public gaze, and the more private gaze of friends, family, lovers, and the self. While the gaze occurs in various places and comes from various groups of people, the texts also present certain environments in which all forms of the gaze are acting upon each other to affect how these freakish women regard their bodies. The texts imply that the gaze, especially the public gaze, has the potential to become a threat to the freakish female characters, as well as to other female characters that are not freakish. The gaze influences how certain female characters in these texts shape their bodies in ways that they would not have been compelled to do otherwise. In particular, “The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe” and “It’s Bad Luck to Die” present the “normal” female characters as being especially vulnerable to the threat of the gaze. McCracken writes that Lois’s “glamorous” mother has “never [gone] anywhere without a mirror, checking and rechecking her reflection, straightening, maintaining” (65). Likewise, Seamon depicts the emaciated Janet as a Weight Watchers guru who preaches food restriction and cannot understand why Suzanne is not happy after reaching her weight goal, saying that, “No one likes to be fat. That’s just a common
defense mechanism” (217). This passage can also be interpreted to suggest the opposite, that Janet’s character is justifying her control and sacrifice by suggesting that no one can be happy in a fat body, and that she is happier in a thin body than she was in a fat one. She may actually fear that Suzanne is happy, and if that is the case, all of her work maintaining a thin body has been wasted. The texts insinuate that these female characters are caught in a panoptic structure of monitoring and maintaining, women who keep a vigil over their bodies so they are never unrecognizable. Their characters have come to see their bodies not as extensions of self, but adversaries that must be controlled, restricted, and maintained.

As Sandra Lee Bartky writes, “In contemporary male patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women.” Bartky suggests that women are always imagining themselves judged by invisible men, and this is a form of “unbound discipline” because there is no formal institution that makes women behave in this manner—they do it on their own accord (140, 143). This unbound discipline is implied both in the character of Lois’s mother and in Janet’s character, as they are not presented as preparing their bodies for any person in particular, but to meet the approval of society at large. This control is much like Foucault’s panopticon in that the fear of the male gaze compels women to consider their bodies as always under scrutiny and need of constant maintenance. Leslie Fiedler writes that such an attitude may begin at a young age, saying, “When young woman find what they are taught to regard as ‘excess hair’ growing between their breasts, on upper lips, in their armpits, or on their legs, they may doubt their full femininity as well as their full humanity” (32). Again we return to issues of one’s body defining one’s humanity, of who is recognizable as a human and who is not. Even when they are young, Fiedler suggests, women begin to think of their bodies as objects that must be preened in order to be recognizably human and female. If
they cannot exert control over their weight, hair, and faces, they risk becoming unrecognizable, as are the freakish females in these stories.

The texts present the freakish female characters as having various levels of comfort with their bodies. The characters realize that they do not fit in to the normative framework and that their bodies are especially vulnerable to the gaze, and while some are portrayed as trying to alter their bodies to appear more normal, others alter their bodies to appear more non-recognizable. Some theorists such as Robert Bogdan have suggested that “being a freak is not a personal matter, a physical condition that some people have. ‘Freak’ is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation” (3). Bogdan is speaking primarily of the sideshow freak, implying that within the sideshow the “freak” identity is all in presentation, costuming, and ways of thinking about people. Yet he is too fast to dismiss the idea of the physical body as having anything to do with constructing a freak identity, inside or outside of the freak show. While people who were not freaks originally were able to make their bodies freakish for the sideshow by means of tattooing and weight gain, some persons who are hailed as freaks cannot ignore the fact that they are being identified as such. Within these texts, freaks such as Olympia and Miranda are born with bodies that make them freakish and non-recognizable. Others, such as Lois and Suzanne, choose to shape their bodies in ways that are outside the normative framework. These texts suggest that the freakish identity is not only a conscious choice, but for some is a biological fact, regardless of whether or not they define themselves as freakish.

In these texts, certain freakish female characters take advantage of their unusual form of embodiment, assume the identity of a freak, and very willingly presenting themselves for the gaze. The texts further imply that certain forms of the gaze can be spaces of possibility, spaces
in which there is the potential to gain power, but also spaces that can pose great risk to the female freak. Yet the power of the female freak lies in display, because it is only when they are seen that freakish women can look back at the viewer, that their bodies have a chance to create a rupture in the norms.

The act of display in these texts is presented as necessary because it has the potential to transform both the freakish female and the viewer of the display. In the act of showing their bodies, certain freakish female characters gain a level of comfort with their embodied selves that they would not have had otherwise. Dunn hints at this in *Geek Love* when Miranda tells Olympia that it is only since she started dancing at the Glass House that she has taken a “different approach” to her tail and come to think of it as “marvelous,” more of an asset instead of a liability (31). However, the text also makes it clear that Miranda is still not entirely comfortable with having a tail and a non-recognizable body because she is still considering Miss Lick’s offer of surgery to remove her “specialty” (34). Yet revealing her tail and using it as a means to gain economic power, as well as some control of the male gaze, lends her a sense of acceptance she did not have before. If she had not taken the risk of displaying herself and chosen to have the tail surgically removed, Dunn suggests, she would not have made this transformation.

A few of these texts also imply that, in displaying their bodies, the freakish women can have an effect on the “normal” viewer of the spectacle and how she regards her body, creating an opportunity for the normative framework to be ruptured. Seamon suggests this in “The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe” when Janet tries to force Suzanne out of Weight Watchers. Suzanne is attending meetings in order to monitor her weight gain instead of her weight loss,
brings in rich recipes to share with the other women who are ostensibly still trying to lose
weight, and is accused of “upsetting other clients” (219).

Seamon implies that Janet’s character is afraid of Suzanne publicly displaying her flesh, worried the that other members will see Suzanne, recall the joys of being fat, and reclaim their fat bodies. Suzanne’s character becomes a danger because she is non-recognizable, abject, and yet she cannot be forgotten. Seamon suggests that Suzanne’s large body is a site of pleasure, and poses a temptation to other Weight Watchers members because they can see their former, and possibly happier, unrestricted selves reflected in her, with all of her bodily excess. Elizabeth Grosz writes that this is the danger of the freak, that “the viewer’s horror lies in the recognition that this monstrous being is at the heart of his or her identity, for it is all that must be ejected or abjected from self-image to make the bounded, category-obeying self possible” (65). It is only when the freak is seen that the viewer can realize how similar her body is to the body of the freak, the non-recognizable body, and possibly begin to question the norm, the reasons their bodies are in separate categories, and if they should be.
IV. THE PUBLIC GAZE

These texts suggest that when the freakish female puts herself in the public gaze, it creates a site of risk and danger as well as a site of pleasure and power, an ambivalent but necessary space for the female freak. The freakish female has potential access to different forms of power when her body is in the public gaze, including power that stems from the erotic, from shock, and from the money she earns through being seen. Yet the texts also suggest that when the female freaks presents her body for the gaze, she simultaneously puts herself in danger.

For example, in *Geek Love*, when Oly dances at the Glass House, her character feels a fleeting sense of control and empowerment when she is on the stage because her body is so shocking. “How proud I am, dancing in the air full of eyes rubbing at me uncovered, unable to look away because of who I am” (20). Dunn presents her character as realizing that her freakish body is powerful in its biology—she is a born freak and the men can focus on nothing but her. But Dunn also connects Oly’s gaining power by being a spectacle to a loss of power. One would not have occurred without the other, since she is physically assaulted and has to be lifted onto the stage before she can have her moment in the limelight. Her revelation is also described as a physically uncomfortable one: “Cold air hits my scalp and a hand is thumping my hump in an investigative way […] my wig is dangling high above my head in a wavering hand. My dark glasses are snatched away and a light sears in at me” (19). Her blouse and harness are removed, she is exposed against her will, but without that exposure she would not have been able to capture the gaze of the entire audience at the Glass House, implying a close link between power and vulnerability.

Dunn also suggests the power of exposure has a tenuous and limited nature, because Oly’s character feels terrible about her performance shortly after it is over. She stands with the
rest of the performers on the side of the stage and her wig and clothing don’t seem to fit correctly. Her body is suddenly terribly awkward, and her character says, “there wasn’t any graceful way to end it” and “the shame had already started icing up my valves,” a disgrace that grows even deeper when she is paid for her performance (20). In this instance, being given ten dollars in payment for her freakishness is not empowering, but can be connected to the money and power that was in play at the Binewski Fabulon. Throughout the novel, Dunn paints the spectacle of the Fabulon in apocalyptic tones, as Arty’s need for money, power, and control over his followers leads to the whole operation literally going up in flames. The text implies that Oly’s character’s shame results in part from the awful memories of her brother Arty and her father, how money and power were tied to pride and bodily display in the Fabulon, and how she was controlled by the gaze of her brother.

At the same time, the novel contrasts the public gaze in the Fabulon and the public gaze in the Glass House, seeming to take a more ambivalent attitude to the freakish females who are on display at the latter. This strip show of freaks is a space of power at the same time it is a site of risk. The girls who work at the Glass House have been born with bodies that are freakish in some manner, and use their bodies to gain economic power. The Glass House does provide some level of safety for its performers since there are people around to protect the women from gawkers, as well as laws that prevent harassment (16). The novel also suggests that, for Miranda’s character, dancing at the Glass House gives her a sense of pleasure and empowerment. Dunn describes that, as Miranda dances, “she pulled the plume down, unsnapped the G-string, and whipped it off with a flourish, waving her ass still, her head tipped up and an unmistakable giggle bubbling out of her as she revealed the thin curling tail that jutted out from the end of her spine and bounced just above her round buttocks” (17). This passage suggests that in eroticizing
her tail, Miranda has both sexual power and the power of shock. While people are staring at her, she returns their gaze and giggles at them, does not seem at all shamed by how she looks but instead exhibits a child-like joy in the fact that she is different. She is also benefiting economically though dancing at the Glass House, as are the rest of the performers, and knows that people are paying so they can look at her. In these ways, the Glass House gives her an opportunity to revel in her non-recognizability.

Yet despite the ability to gain certain forms of power at the Glass House, Dunn implies the environment still holds some level of danger because the women are being exposed to and objectified by male onlookers, but even more importantly, they are seen by the socially freakish Miss Lick who wishes to change their bodies. The changes her character seeks remove any trace of normative beauty from the freakish females, and can also be very often painful, such as one instance in which Miss Lick burns off one female freak’s very long hair (32). Thus, while the Glass House itself may not be a particularly unsafe space during the time of performance, there is danger in the time after the show when Miss Lick can find and speak with the performers and propose body alterations that would change them from objects of desire to sexless objects, or even objects of disgust. Overall the novel takes an ambivalent attitude towards the Glass House and freaks being eroticized – power and danger are intimately paired. This is further illustrated by the fact that Miranda both gains pride in her tail and encounters Miss Lick in that same space. Her freakish tail is in danger at the same time she is given an incentive to keep it.

The ambivalent nature of the public gaze is also suggested in the story “Mr. Chicken.” The protagonist is a bearded woman who keeps herself clean-shaven and is employed as a restaurant manager. Her character decides to grow out her beard in order to draw the attention of Mr. Chicken, a very obese man who is coming into the restaurant every day and eating a lot of
food while staring at other customers and upsetting them. The bearded woman is certain that the restaurant is losing business because of Mr. Chicken’s audacity, and feels it is her duty as restaurant manager to take action so that he stops his rude behavior. Her character says, “I swear he’s the reason why five customers get out of line and go to the restaurant next door. While I watch them walk out without buying anything, I decide to grow out my beard. I will make Mr. Chicken stare at me so he won’t look at anyone else. I’ll shock him, scare him” (88). Her character wants to disrupt his gaze so that he stops looking at other people, and the plan does work in that she succeeds in drawing the attention of Mr. Chicken, upsetting him, and bringing a sort of resolution to their conflict. However, as is the case with Oly’s character in *Geek Love*, this text implies that the power of shock is ambivalent because it can be difficult to control and may even put the freakish female at risk.

For example, when the restaurant manager goes to a bar in order to see how men will react to her beard, there is a “group of three guys sitting in a booth at the far wall, whispering and looking over at me every once in a while.” The bearded woman sits down and orders a drink. Later, one of the guys from the booth comes over to tell her that he and his friends like her beard. She thanks him but is apprehensive. Her character says, “I have no idea whether he’s being serious or sarcastic, but I’ve always been terrible at judging such things. The guy returns to his friends and they all look over to me and one of them gives a little wave.” The bearded woman waves back but she says, “I don’t leave the bar until after they’ve gone. They were probably sincere but I don’t feel like taking chances” (90-91). While the bearded woman’s non-recognizable body is empowering her by drawing the attention of Mr. Chicken, at the same time, revealing her body puts her at risk from the gaze of others. Her character is beginning to lose control of the gaze because she cannot stop people from looking at her, and because she does not
know what the intentions of the men at the bar might be. In the end her physical appearance serves to imprison her in the bar for a time, rather than risk going out into the street and meeting up with people who may not have the best of intentions toward her. The bar serves as a safe space in a similar way to how the Glass House serves as a safe space, a public place where the gaze is somewhat less dangerous because rules can be enforced. It is a place where the female freak can find a temporary public haven, but at the same time she will be in the gaze whether or not she wants to be. These are ambivalent spaces, safe at the same time they are confining.

Hollis Seamon presents another sort of public gaze in “The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe,” a gaze that suggests both the power and limitations of the freakish erotic. Seamon draws Suzanne as a character who knows how to use the public gaze and her sexuality to seduce men, and one who enjoys the bodily pleasure of sex. Her character knows the importance of being looked at, and knows how controlling the gaze can give rise to power. “My grandmother, a fine large woman […] taught me that: ‘Suzanne,’ she’d say, ‘always leave a room well. Make them remember you.” In this particular section of the story, she makes an exit that is remembered by a local Weight Watchers representative who calls her that evening and graces her bed for the next three nights (219). In that same section, however, the two female weight watchers representatives at the same meeting are hostile to Suzanne’s jokes and do not chuckle as the male representative does. He is enticed by Suzanne’s large body, while the two women seem threatened and disgusted by her because she is not obeying the rules of Weight Watchers.

Seamon suggests further difficulties in that, while Suzanne is desired by the Weight Watchers representative, she realizes that this is not a relationship that can be long-lasting because he “can’t really afford to take me anywhere or be seen on public with me: me, the embodiment of all that Weight Watchers loathes and profits from.” This episode implies the
complexity of the forbidden desire for the freak, and in this case the fat woman. Seamon also suggests that Suzanne usually treats men in this manner, not just the Weight Watchers representative, because she says “I don’t like to keep men for more than three or four nights” (220). Here it is insinuated that Suzanne likes to keep control in her relationships, and that she may have been hurt in the past because she lets go of men before they have a chance to dissolve the relationship. She is also very conscious of her public image, carefully controls how she appears in the gaze and to which audiences, saying “I liked to change my bars frequently so that I didn’t become a regular—the resident loose and easy fatso” (221). Her character realizes that she will maintain sexual power if she flits from bar to bar, but will lose it if she becomes recognized by those at the bar and considered desperate instead of mysterious. This passage also seems to suggest that the erotic power of the freak can be a temporary power, a power of novelty that Suzanne realizes she must renew with different audiences, that if she becomes too commonplace or seems too needy, she will not be able to control the gaze.

Suzanne’s character also emphasizes her personal hygiene and cleanliness saying, “Listen, I keep myself clean, polished, shaved, deodorized, shampooed like everyone else. I’m not some evil-smelling fat woman” (216-7). She says this in part ironically, as if expecting the listener to have conjured a stereotypical imagine in her mind, but her character is also conscious of the fact that she is presenting herself for the gaze of the men in the bar and that she will be, on some level, objectified by them. Her fat body is an erotic body, but Seamon suggests that Suzanne’s body can maintain its erotic control only under certain circumstances, if it appears well-kept and well-groomed. The text suggests that while the freakish erotic does have a certain power, it can also be a tenuous power that is in large part based on the nature of the audience and their gaze.
The ability to control the gaze is another subject addressed by these texts, as they imply that, in presenting the body for the gaze, the freakish female risks losing control of the gaze entirely. The nature of the public gaze is largely determined by place, and while the stories suggest that freakish women can have different levels of control over the gaze in different places, they always risk losing control. Katherine Weese suggests that, in the public space of the Glass House, Miranda asserts control over the gaze by exhibiting herself as an object but choosing how she shows herself, deciding how the viewer will see her and controlling their gaze (357). Yet we must ask to what extent the gaze can really be controlled, since different viewers will interpret the body in different ways, and these interpretations cannot be controlled, even in relatively safe spaces. In *Geek Love*, for instance, the text suggests that Miranda’s character cannot control the way that Miss Lick’s character sees and interprets her body, because Miss Lick interprets all normative, attractive, female bodies in the same way. As Rachel Adams writes, Miss Lick views the removal of “femaleness” as being the best way to equalize the sexes and resolve social inequality. In her mind, the normatively beautiful female body is always a dangerous body (“American” 286). In the novel, Oly’s character says, “Miss Lick’s purpose is to liberate women who are liable to be exploited by male hungers. These exploitable women are, in Miss Lick’s view, the pretty ones.” Miss Lick assumes that pretty women can only gain power through being used by men, and her character wants women to “no longer depend on their own exploitability but…use their talents and intelligence to become powerful” (162). No matter how Miranda or the other performers at the Glass House want their bodies to be seen, the implication in the text is that Miss Lick will see Miranda’s body as preventing her from reaching “greater goals.” The text also suggests it is futile to try and control how the men at the Glass House see Miranda. While it is true that she has some power because she is returning their gaze and laughing at them,
they all want to “squirt her full of baby juice,” according to Oly’s character’s assessment of the situation (17). Even in spaces assumed to be somewhat controllable, there are still elements of danger for the female freak that cannot always control the gaze as much as she needs to.

Similarly, the story “Ears” suggests that, when the freakish woman presents herself for the gaze, she can end up losing control of her own image and its interpretation, and find herself de-humanized in the gaze, a mere object of curiosity. The protagonist of this story is a woman with four ears, two on her head and two on the sides of her neck. Her character feels comfortable exposing her ears in the tattoo parlor where she works, because the normative framework is different than outside the tattoo parlor and most of the patrons assume the ears are “some sort of body modification” (60). The four-eared woman becomes an insignia for the tattoo parlor because she needs to increase her income. While she gains some economic power by allowing her image to be used commercially, painted on the front window in the full gaze of passers-by, she realizes that she cannot control the actions of those who are now looking at her, or her interactions with them. Her exposure on the tattoo parlor window changes the nature of that public space by changing her relationship to the public gaze. Her body is more visible, and therefore more powerful economically, but also more vulnerable. Patrons start coming and taking pictures of her; while most of them ask her beforehand and pay for the privilege, not all of them do, and she ends up being unable to control the use and exploitation of her own image. In one instance, “a middle-aged guy comes in with his camera and starts taking pictures of me. I stare at him for a moment. Most people realize their audacity and stop photographing me when I glare. Not this one” (78-79). The photographer later smiles at the four-eared woman and hands her a twenty-dollar bill, which leaves her incensed because she is not being respected as a fellow human being.
Her character further loses control of the gaze when a local toy store starts selling plastic ears that people can attach to the sides of their necks and achieve an appearance somewhat like hers. “By Thursday morning the ear trend is all over town. At the grocery store there are little kids, toddlers, with tiny ears on the sides of their necks. Even some of their mothers have two sets of ears […] it’s so pervasive that the ears start looking normal to me. Expected” (77). The text implies that she has lost control of her image, but it is ambivalent about this development because it also suggests that the normative framework has been ruptured and her ears have become desirable and less freakish. This incorporates several different power exchanges—the four-eared woman has gained economic power because she put herself on display, yet she cannot control who is interpreting her body or how they are interpreting it, but as the popularity of having four ears grows, there is a indication of recognition and approval of her body, a hint that she has perhaps temporarily ruptured the norms since people are wearing ears as they would wear any other body decoration or accessory. This suggests the complexity of the multiple power exchanges that can occur when a body is on display, and the intricate web of both power and danger that can be created, how a gaze from a single viewer can mean many things.

Along these lines, all of the texts suggest display environments are complex in that they involve different levels of spectacle, performance, power, and the ability to control the gaze; and that these factors are always subject to changes and shifts. In this complexity, the texts also suggest that the danger of display can be too great for the female freak, and in certain spaces it is best for them to hide their bodies from the gaze and pass as normal. In *Geek Love*, Miranda’s character reveals her tail only at The Glass House where she works, a place where having a “specialty” will benefit her economically, and where she gains power through simultaneously accepting some level of risk. Likewise, when she goes out to the Glass House, Oly’s character
does her best to cover herself with a chest harness, coat, and wig so that her body appears slightly less unrecognizable (19). But Oly is uncovered in the Glass House despite her disguise, and in this manner the text also suggests that it can be difficult for a non-recognizable person to be able to ever conceal herself adequately, that she is always at risk of being hailed as a freak, and thus merely being in public poses a level of risk, even if she is not in the gaze.

Some of the texts suggest that the gaze becomes a burden for their freakish female characters. Since they have been hailed as freaks in the past, Lois’s character and the bearded woman in “Mr. Chicken” both find themselves caught in something like a panoptic structure, worried everyone is looking at them even when their freakish elements are covered and those around them likely do not suspect anything is amiss. In “Mr. Chicken,” the bearded woman’s character explains that she has been shaving religiously for most of her life, afraid that customers at the restaurant may notice and stare at her facial hair. She recalls that in high school “I never wanted anyone looking at me, knew the girls who didn’t shave their legs and arms were teased something awful. They didn’t care, but I did, fretted constantly about what people would say if they knew I had a beard” (88-89). The text suggests that, even when their differences are covered, the characters with non-recognizable bodies are still afraid that those around them will be able to sense that they are different.

This idea is also suggested in “It’s Bad Luck to Die,” as Lois’s character covers herself whenever she is in public and outside of the tattoo parlor so people do not stare at her. She is anxious about the public reaction to her tattoos, even though her husband Tiny has not tattooed her face, hands, feet, or neck, so she can wear long-sleeved clothing and look unmarked. Yet Lois’s character says that she “suspected all waitresses of gossiping about me in the kitchen” (70). Of course if Lois or the bearded woman’s characters did not maintain or cover their bodies
in a certain way they would be hailed as freaks and subject to the gaze, but the texts suggest they are especially vigilant because they realize the undue attention they would receive if they were discovered to be freaks. While the discovery would likely not bring bodily harm to either of their characters, they do not wish to have to confront the stares. This further implies that there are certain public spaces in which it is disadvantageous to have a non-recognizable body, that recognition is more important than the power that can be gained.

The texts also suggest the ambivalence of the public gaze in that bodies can be recognizable and accepted in some spaces and by some audiences, but not by others. One example of this is the body of Lois’s character, which is only for the gaze of a certain audience since she uncovers it only in the tattoo shop and at home. In the tattoo shop her character willingly subjects herself to the gaze and allows her body to be a display object when she “started sitting in the shop in a halter top and high-cut, low-slung shorts, ready to get up and turn a thigh this way or that, showing the customers how the colors went” (66). The text proposes that non-recognizable bodies can be intended for display only for a certain audience, in front of which they will be recognized and appreciated, and humanity of the female freak validated. In a similar manner, in the story “Ears,” the woman with four ears only displays her body at the tattoo shop and at her home.

This implies that the normative framework within a culture can shift from place to place, and is largely dependent on venue and the nature of the gaze, who is watching at any one time. The freakish characters in these texts have bodies that are recognizable in some contexts but not recognizable in others. The contexts in which their bodies are acceptable tend to be ones that are more personal spaces and involve family members, friends, and those with whom they are
intimate. In contrast to public spaces, private spaces tend to be sites of safety for the female freak and the non-recognizable body.
V. THE GAZE AMONG INTIMATES

In several of these texts, private spaces are spaces in which the female freak can more easily explore the potential of her body and of embodiment. These intimate spaces can also be ambivalent spaces, however, as the texts imply that intimate environments can be ones of simultaneous danger and identification. They are spaces of safety and recognizability from intimates, yet intimates can be a source of tension. Intimate spaces can also go beyond the limitations of the public gaze to explore tactility and the body, the potentials of embodiment that are realized through touching and being touched by people or objects. Through touch the body becomes a way to connect to other people, and to gain an appreciation for the body and the physical pleasure to be found in being embodied.

Another subject several of the texts explore is the issue of trust among family members, including which family members the freakish female characters listen to when defining what is a desirable body and how to shape their bodies. The family can act as a support system, a source of disapproval, or can even endanger the life of the female freak. When the freakish female character is in the gaze of her own family, the family can play a role in defining what is a “proper” body and the proper ways to modify one’s body, but family members can be controlling and prescriptive, dictating which bodies are the optimal sort of bodies to have, as well as the ways in which the body can or cannot be used.

In *Geek Love*, Dunn suggests how much power the family can have over how the freakish female views her body and what she believes to be a desirable body. As Rachel Adams writes, the Binewskis create a new space in the carnival where the norms are looked down upon and the freak bodies are elevated ("American" 281). In this inverted world, Olympia’s character comes to think of the “Other” as the norm, i.e. those with recognizable bodies (Hardin 339). In her
character’s particular family environment, she learns to have some measure of pride in her non-
recognizable body because it is the sort of body that not everyone can have. As a born freak, she
is special. Oly’s character recalls the words of her father who told her to remember “how much
leverage you’ve got on the norms just in your physical presence,” a pride based on the power of
shock (151).

While Oly’s character is often self-loathing, she also has moments when she enjoys her
body, such as when she can control the gaze at the Glass House. Dunn portrays the Binewskis as
having their own system of determining what makes a “good” body, based on the amount of
economic potential that any one body has as a tool for display. In one instance in which Arty’s
character is mentally abusing Oly, he does it by saying “it isn’t your fault you’re so ordinary”
(75). While the Binewski family does not rupture the normative framework, they create a new
framework within their family in which the power of being outside the normative framework is
preferable to being inside the framework. The freakish body is more revered than the body that
fits within the norms, and Oly’s character wishes that she had “two heads” or “a fish’s tail
instead of legs,” that she was somehow “more special” (34).

At the same time, the novel suggests the family unit can be dangerous to the female freak,
as happens when Arty takes over the Binewski Fabulon and begins to assert control over his
sisters’ reproductive capabilities. As Rachel Adams writes, Arty has to control how his sisters
reproduce, because they can produce new freaks and threaten his ability to produce new freaks
surgically and define proper body standards (“American” 284). The Binewskis adhere to what
Katherine Weese calls “wholly conventional nuclear and patriarchal family practices” (353), and
this includes a patriarchal attitude towards the female body. Within the Binewski family, the
female body becomes a tool, a site of production for freaks. Elly, Iphy, and Oly’s characters
have grown up in the family gaze, accepting the idea that their bodies are biologically special. They also accepted a system in which their mother’s body was considered a site of freak production, a machine of sorts. Those beliefs end up trapping them in the same system in which their bodies are used as their mother’s was, to produce new freaks. The patriarchal family structure controls the babies these freakish women have, the babies they keep, and the standards of what is freakish enough under the gaze of Arty and/or Al, as both of these male characters end up deciding the babies’ fate.

Iphy, Elly, and Oly all have different reactions to Arty and his attempts to control the family and family affairs. This is apparent in one scene shortly after Elly and Iphy, the conjoined twin sisters, start having their period. The three siblings realize both that they will be able to conceive and that their parents will someday die. Oly tries to comfort them all, saying, “‘Arty will take care of us […] he’ll be the boss.’ But I was thinking I’d marry Arty and sleep with my arms around him in a big bed.” Elly responds by sneering and saying “‘We can depend on Arty.’” Her twin Iphy “tried to be reassuring. ‘I’m going to marry Arty and we’ll take care of everybody…”’ This comment results in Elly punching her, and the twins starting a fistfight. These same attitudes carry through most of the novel. Elly is upset at Arty for trying to control her and disgusted with her sister Iphy for being nice to him. Iphy is fascinated by Arty and is always trying to make peace, and Oly adores Arty despite the verbal abuse he heaps on her.

This changes somewhat, however, when the twins become pregnant. Both of them want to have an abortion, but Arty refuses to allow Elly and Iphy to terminate their pregnancy because he wants them to birth another freak child to add to the Fabulon (259). When they resist, Arty orders Elly’s lobotomy, increasing his control over her by preventing her from thinking and acting for herself, and leaving Iphy to mother both her child and her sister (271-272). Oly still
adores Arty, however, and wants to give him a child to show how much she loves him. She means the baby to be “a gift” and “a living love for Arturo,” and convinces their youngest brother Chick to impregnate her with Arty’s sperm (299). Yet Arty also becomes enraged when Oly gets pregnant, assuming that she has done it behind his back with another hunchback who is traveling with the Fabulon (303). After Oly’s baby Miranda is born, he orders his sister to get rid of the child because she is not freakish enough, threatening to kill the baby if she isn’t disposed of (33). Dunn paints this space of the family as being an ambiguous space because, while it defines Oly’s freakish body as special and desirable, it also seeks to control her body and its capabilities, as well as those of her sisters. The family here is a crucial space for defining not only what is a proper body, but what are proper used for the body.

The texts also explore situations within families in which mothers and children exchange the gaze, and how mothers can manipulate their children to want or not want a certain body type. Embodiment becomes a way of connecting mothers to children, and in this manner the texts posit another form of recognition/non-recognition—that mothers want to have children that are recognizable to them as their children. Especially in “Beard” and “It’s Bad Luck to Die,” the mother characters try to influence how their children shape their bodies, so that the shape will be recognizable to them as mothers. In “Beard,” the bearded woman does not want to allow her eleven-year-old daughter, Kimber, to shave her moustache. Kimber wants to shave because she is being teased by her schoolmates and feels abjected, but her mother believes that Kimber just needs to get used to her moustache, and in the end she will be pleased that she has it. The bearded woman composes “little speeches about the benefits of beardedness” and how “more women should be so lucky” (100).
In this text the bearded woman’s character is trying to have the opposite to facial hair that her mother did, saying that “when I started growing a moustache my mother gasped then cried then dragged my father from in front of the television. An hour later she made him teach me how to shave with a razor” (95). The bearded woman is still cringing at her mother’s horror and has the exact opposite reaction to her daughter’s beard, encouraging instead of stifling it. At the same time, she repeats her mother’s error of not trying to identify with the freakish child and instead trying to shape the freakish child into her own image, i.e. not wanting her daughter to shave. When Kimber is made fun of at school, the bearded woman does her best to make Kimber want to keep the beard by vowing to find and punish the boys who were teasing her. “I tell her that everything is going to be okay, that we’re going to find out the names of the boys and contact the police, contact their parents, make sure there are repercussions” (97). After Kimber says she still wants to shave, her bearded mother gives her ice cream and keeps trying to avoid the issue of having rather than confront Kimber’s desires to have a body that is recognizable to other children.

The bearded woman is prideful of the way she looks and very worried that her daughter will reject her beard, telling her ex-husband that “Kimber will never have pride in her beard if she doesn’t start now […] she’ll spend her whole life shaving and trying to deny it’” (98). While the bearded woman is concerned that her daughter comes to appreciate her body, her concern blinds her to the reality her daughter faces at school of being an object of the gaze and non-recognizable. The fact that she overcame a struggle perhaps blinds her to the fact that her daughter will have to face the same pain. But the bearded woman wants Kimber to keep her beard so she can recognize that Kimber is her daughter, Kimber recognizes that she has a bearded mother, and in not shaving, both of them reflect an acceptance that their bodies are non-
recognizable to most people, but recognizable to each other. She wants to see her beard reflected in her daughter’s face, just as her own mother wanted to see a clean-shaven chin on her daughter.

The inverse of this situation is presented in “It’s Bad Luck to Die.” Again the text suggests that the gaze of the parent can be very conflicted, one that is at once loving, critical, and prescriptive, one that wants to see its own image reproduced on the body of the child and views embodiment as symbol of maternal connection. McCracken describes Lois’s mother’s character as dutifully applying makeup every day and constantly checking her appearance. In contrast, Lois’s character feels better about her body once she is tattooed, but she knows that all her mother wants is for Lois “to become miraculously blank.” Lois’s mother worries that her daughter will always be labeled because of her tattoos, and says, “Does it ever occur to you that you are not leading a normal life?” and “I just feel like you’re painting yourself in a corner” (70-71). Lois’s character covers her body for her mother’s gaze, recognizing that her mother does not like the tattoos, but of course both of them realize what is underneath her clothing. Lois’s mother gives Lois her old clothing because they are close to the same size (72-73). In wearing the clothing, Lois is not only covering the tattoos, but looking more like her mother, suggesting that her mother might want to pretend her body, a blank and recognizable one, is there. The text suggests that Lois’s mother recognizes her daughter’s body, but she does so reluctantly.

In *Geek Love*, Dunn suggests another kind of parental gaze when Oly is watching Miranda perform in the Glass House, one of simultaneous recognition and non-recognition in which the body becomes a site to both identify with and separate from the child. Oly’s character contrasts Miranda’s performance with watching her own freakish siblings perform, and remembers the mesmerizing control they seemed to have over audiences. Miranda’s power is
somewhat different, a more erotic control over the audience that confuses Oly. “It was strange and different to me, watching these people watching her. Because they thought she was pretty, because they thought it would be good to grab her ass and pump jizz into her.” She sees that Miranda has some of the same features as her siblings, the “Binewski cheekbones and Mongol eyes,” but she is not used to a member of her family being regarded as beautiful in a normative way, and this confuses her (17).

At the same time, Oly’s character is intent on protecting the freakish part of Miranda’s body, the part that connects her genetically to her daughter, the part in which she sees her own heritage—Miranda’s tail. She is elated to hear that Miranda likes her tail, but devastated when she discovers that her daughter hated her tail when she was younger (33-35). In looking at Miranda, Oly’s character sees herself and her family reflected, and she is pleased by what her body created, calling Miranda “my dove” (17). She wants Miranda to know her family history and have pride in her tail, and pursues Miss Lick to stop her from taking it. Yet, as Katherine Weese writes, this is an act that symbolically connects Oly to and separates her from her family, since Weese argues that Oly killing Miss Lick to save Miranda is “symbolically killing Arty” (360-361). In this manner *Geek Love* again paints the familial gaze as an ambivalent gaze, one that can have its own sort of normative framework and set of standards in which certain bodies are recognizable in the family unit, but not outside of it. The family can be a safe space for the non-recognizable body, but also a space of contention because of the different standards of recognizability that exist within the family unit.

In both *Geek Love* and “It’s Bad Luck to Die,” the freakish female characters shape their bodies specifically for the gaze of their lovers, but this manipulation also goes beyond the gaze to include different “uses” for the body. In these texts, the intimate space becomes one in which
the female freak can be influenced to conceive of and shape her body in certain ways, and in which the lover can play a role in controlling her embodiment. The two texts take an ambivalent attitude towards manipulating the body in this manner, as such an act can expand or restrict possibilities for the body, can be an expression of love, but can also lead to the female freak shaping her body in ways that endanger her health. In particular, in *Geek Love*, Lil’s character uses her body first as a public subject of the gaze when she geeks as “Crystal Lil” and bites the heads of chicken, but later her body becomes a private site of reproduction in order to please her husband Al and to create children who will be able to earn a living through being subjects of the gaze (6-7). In “It’s Bad Luck to Die,” Lois’s character uses her body as a canvas for Tiny, situating herself as a subject of the gaze both in the private space of their bedroom and in the more public space of Tiny’s tattoo parlor where she sits on a stool as a live model.

In both of the texts the freak characters have something to gain economically from letting their partners use their bodies—Lil is helping the family business by producing freaks, and Lois is helping Tiny’s business by modeling for prospective customers—and Lil and Lois both become non-recognizable because of the way they allow their husbands to shape their bodies. McCracken suggests that Lois’s character does not regret her decision since she calls herself a “love letter”(77), but by the end of *Geek Love*, Lil’s character is in a fog from all of the drugs she ingested to produce her family, suggesting the toll that has been exacted on her body from being a site of freak production.

Lil’s character shapes her body from the inside out, ingesting and exposing herself to different chemicals in order to achieve body abnormalities in her children (8). Her body exists in a patriarchal system in which the female body is seen as “lesser” than the male body. As Rachel Adams writes, when the children are born, Al’s contribution is largely nudged aside, while Lil is
faulted or exalted (*Sideshow* 200). When Chick is born, for example, it is Lil’s body, not Al’s, that is primarily blamed for the fact Chick does not have the requisite deformities that would make him useful and profitable to the family. Lil cries while saying, “I did everything, Al… I did what you said, Al… What happened, Al? How could this happen?” (64). Her feelings of responsibility are also apparent in that she blames herself for other freakish children who did not survive and calls them her “failures” (53). Dunn suggests that Lil’s character has come to think of her body as a tool, and even though her husband has provided the sperm and directions for what she was supposed to do, Lil’s weeping and the labeling of the children as “her” failures insinuates that her character believes he played a lesser role in the outcome. She does not seem to be mad at him, only herself. This speaks to Al’s control over the way that Lil perceives herself and interprets his body as superior to hers. This also makes it clear that Lil is dependent on Al for direction and for how to define herself and use her body. She has developed an identity in terms of what Al wants and needs—a creator of freaks.

During the course of the novel, the way Lil has molded the inside of her body to be a site of freakish reproduction is manifest outwardly, and make her non-recognizable in similar ways to her children. Right before Chick, the most freakish of Lil’s children, displays his powers of telekinesis, Lil’s hair is described in terms of a medusa as “jerking out in thick snakes that tried to escape from her head in all directions” (69). As Lil’s character grows older, the text suggests that her body becomes less recognizable and less womanly. “Large bones came close to the surface as her woman-softeness withered. Her eyes were giving her trouble, the focus softening and shortening” (187). Rachel Adams writes that the twins Elly and Iphy, as well as Lil, are all destroyed in this manner, through having their sexuality and reproductive capacities controlled (“American” 285). Lil’s body is sacrificed for the show, blamed when things do not go well, and
manipulated until her character is mentally and physically exhausted. At the same time, in the end of the novel, Lil is shown rocking (and then humping) Al’s dead body, telling him they must start again, that they will build the show anew (320-321). The text suggests that Lil might make the same sacrifice again, give her body to create another freak show for Al and for herself, yet it is difficult to tell since, by the end of the novel, her character is deluded and demented from the years of abuse her body has endured.

The story “It’s Bad Luck to Die” differs somewhat from *Geek Love* in that the practice of tattooing is something that Lois and Tiny’s characters do to each other as an act of love, a physical manifestation of how much they care about each other. Tiny’s character is first attracted to Lois because of her potential as a tattoo subject, because she is tall and has a lot of skin (62). McCracken suggests that Tiny looks at bodies as an artist would look at a canvas, empty space to fill. Tiny’s characterattoos everything from his initials to an El Greco reproduction on Lois (64, 68-69). While the implications of the male marking the female body may be unsettling in terms of dominance and ownership issues, unlike *Geek Love* in which Lil’s body is the only one that is manipulated, “It’s Bad Luck to Die” does suggest an important reciprocity in the relationship as Tiny wants Lois to put her initials on him and mark his body as hers (75). His character has also been heavily tattooed by himself and others before he meets Lois, and so the text suggests it is not just the female body, but all bodies that are canvases that can be marked and thereby given meaning. These two characters in particular form a connection through physically marking and looking at each other, modifying the body for the gaze of the other.

The text also suggests that in sharing her body with Tiny, Lois’s character gains a greater level of comfort with her body because it gains personal meaning, and she builds an appreciation
for her body that she did not have previously. Before she was tattooed, Lois refused to look at herself in mirrors. Once she is tattooed, Tiny puts mirrors everywhere in the house, compelling Lois to look at and appreciate herself (65). At the same time that Lois is gaining greater comfort with her embodied self, her character also accepts certain constraints on her embodiment. Paradoxically, through making her body non-recognizable, Lois’s character must maintain a normative weight. She takes up smoking so that she doesn’t overeat, and can’t have a snack when her mother offers one because Tiny is worried that she will “[change] the expressions of all the tattoos. If I wasn’t careful Washington and Jesus and Fray Felix would start to look surprised or, at best, nauseated” (73). The text suggests that Lois must have a body that is recognizably thin in order for her non-recognizable tattoos to hold their shape. Her body is now recognizable within the community of those who appreciate tattoos, but now Lois has found herself in another framework and another set of standards that dictate what she can do with her body. She has to maintain recognizability in the space of the tattoo parlor and the space of her bedroom, intimate spaces in which she is recognized by Tiny and those who appreciate tattoos. Keeping her body recognizable to this intimate audience means keeping her tattoos recognizable. In this case, doing away with the norm does not mean doing away with body standards entirely, but perhaps accepting a different set of them.

In the end of the story, Lois’s character calls her body a “love letter,” reflecting her love for Tiny and his love for her in the act of marking and looking at the other (77). In this way McCracken suggests how the body can gain a personal meaning through being modified. Once Tiny has passed away, Lois’s mother worries about her daughter’s future, if she will never be married again. She says, “What man will want you when someone else has been scribbling all over you?” (77). While this is not something that is a concern to Lois’s character because she
does not want to get married again, the text does suggest a problem in that her body was recognizable to Tiny’s character, but it is still unrecognizable to most other characters in her fictional world.

This is a dilemma implied by the other texts as well, as several of the freakish female characters have a difficult time finding people who will recognize their bodies and associate with them as intimates, either in friendship or romantic relationships. As Judith Butler writes, people want to be recognized as human, and while not being able to be recognized means that one is performing the work of splitting from present norms and questioning them, one is also risking selfhood (24). These texts represent the female freak characters largely as being abjected, as wanting to find others who recognize them as human and validate their personhood.

In particular, the texts suggest such problems when the freakish female confronts the male gaze. Characters such as Oly, the bearded woman in “Mr. Chicken,” and Suzanne LaFleshe know they are not going to be desired by men in the same way as women with recognizable bodies, or that they are only going to be desired by a few men who recognize their bodies. In “The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe,” the text implies that Suzanne has resigned herself to remaining single and never marrying because she is fat and therefore non-recognizable. Seamon portrays Suzanne as a promiscuous, but under her casually sexual attitude the text suggests that Suzanne has chosen to have only flings because of the way her body looks. Since she is non-recognizable, her character assumes no men would want to be in public with her repeatedly and she will “probably never get married” (225). Her character’s attitude towards men, and how she thinks men think of her, is made clear when Suzanne goes out with a man named Dexter. When he asks if she would like to have dinner again, she is rather taken aback, and says “here was a man not afraid to be seen with me—a find” (222).
While Suzanne appreciates her body, the text suggests that she has been hurt by men in the past and realizes that not all of them with recognize or appreciate her body in the same way she does. The text does not suggest that Suzanne has low self-esteem, but that she knows that the fat body is not appealing or erotic to all people and she must adjust her behavior and actions accordingly, planning not to marry and dating men only three or four times each. Because Suzanne makes a conscious decision to gain weight and become non-recognizable after losing it and becoming recognizably thin, it seems that she places her personal enjoyment of her fat body above the more universal acceptance that a thin body would receive in the public gaze. This also suggests one of the limits of the non-recognizable body—that while one may be accepting and even prideful of one’s body, that acceptance of self has practical limits, and self-esteem will not mean social acceptance.

The story “Mr. Chicken” suggests that the character of the bearded woman has a similar dilemma finding intimates who recognize her body. Her character shaves regularly, but still has problems when she reveals the fact that she has a beard to the men she dates. “I explained the beard to James as we sat side by side on the couch in my apartment. He stared at me, then said he had to leave” (83-84). One of her friends suggests that she just needs to grow her beard out and find a partner who likes the aesthetic of women who have beards. The bearded woman’s character agrees that this would be best, but she is too conscious of the male gaze and danger in public spaces to take the risk of growing out her beard and finding the one or two men who would recognize her body. She says “in the end it’s too easy to shave every morning and keep myself looking normal” (84). Here the text presents the risk inherent in having a non-recognizable body, a character that is weighing the danger of public revelation and the need for approval from the male gaze against the potential of finding a few people who will recognize her
non-recognizable body. Ultimately this character decides that the risk she might accept in revealing her beard is too high a price to pay for a personal relationship (although later, when the stakes are raised to include her job, she does accept the risk of revelation).

While the bearded woman in “Mr. Chicken” decides to maintain her body for the male gaze, other freakish female characters in these texts cannot pass as normal in the same manner. Some of the freakish characters can shape or cover their bodies for the male gaze, but in these texts, those who cannot sometimes end up in compromising relationships with the opposite sex. The male characters that recognize the female freaks are not always kind people, but sometimes the freakish characters in these texts settle for such men because they want to be recognized as human.

For example, in the story “Ears,” the four-eared woman’s character explains that for years she kept an abusive boyfriend, in large part because he was accepting of her ears. “He loved my ears, thought they were beautiful, said I should show them off in public. Of course after a few beers he’d call me a lazy cunt and a good-for-nothing bitch, but even when drunk he never made any mean comments about my ears. I never understood how he managed to hold me up and destroy me at the same time” (65). The texts suggest that for these characters with unrecognizable bodies, sometimes it can be preferable to be recognized in a relationship with someone who is abusive, rather than not being recognized at all.

In *Geek Love*, Dunn suggests that this is part of the nature of Oly’s relationship with her brother Arty. He recognizes her as a human being, loves her, and abuses her verbally, humiliating her to the point of making her cry. At the same time, Arty’s character is dependent on Oly and worries that she will leave the show when she is dating the Pin Kid, another performer who is also a hunchback. In one scene when the rest of the family seems to be
deserting Arty because of his narcissism and greed, he asks Oly to “stick by me. How about it?”

(285). Oly agrees to do this, though at the moment she does so reluctantly. When she tells the
Pin Kid that she isn’t going to go off with him so that she can stay with Arty instead, Oly wants
the Pin Kid to say something to convince her to go with him because it “would have been my
excuse, my motive, my escape tunnel to the world beyond the Binewskis.” Yet when the Pin Kid
is not upset at the breakup, Oly realizes that he had not felt the same way she did about their
relationship and that she is not going to be desired by men, not like her mother was desired by
her father, or like Elly and Iphy are desired. Arty is the only person who will truly depend on her
(287). In her non-recognizable body she cannot even garner the love of other freaks, such as the
Pin Kid. Her relationship with Arty is ambiguous in that, while he recognizes her, he creates an
unsafe place for her, trapped by his dictates. While the text suggests that the intimate space may
be the best space for non-recognizable bodies to gain recognition, the source of the recognition
must be questioned.

Despite the complexities in the Binewski family relationships, the text suggests that
family is what gives Oly’s body meaning. Along these lines, several of the texts imply that the
intimate gaze, in particular the gaze among family, can be a way to give the non-recognizable
body meaning. As Rachel Adams writes, Oly telling Miranda the history of her tail is important
because it is “an empowering tactic for asserting agency and staking a claim in the workings of
larger and often impersonal cultural institution… a means of affirming their unique embodiment
and situating their family history within the context of a larger American national identity”
(“American” 280). Through assigning the body a history, it can develop personal meaning and
become part of one’s identity, connecting the body to a certain group of people in a certain time
period. The family can give the non-recognizable body personal value beyond its use as a tool to gain power in the public gaze, can ground it in a time, a place, and a context.

A similar suggestion about the connection between body and family is made in “The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe” when Suzanne’s character is confronted by Janet and other members of Weight Watchers and asked to stop attending the meetings. At the moment of confrontation, Suzanne’s character recalls her grandmother, “a fine large woman who died…at the age of 97, unslimed by time or sorrow,” and it is with this memory that she rejects the demands of the Weight Watchers representatives to stop weighing herself and publicly displaying her body at the Weight Watchers meetings (219). Seamon suggests that Suzanne’s character’s pride in her non-recognizable body is connected to stories, history, and family. She recognizes her body as being like her grandmother’s body, a body that connotes strength, power, and presence. Embodiment becomes a way of recognizing people as belonging to a certain family and tradition. Seeing the self is seeing history, and shared traits. The body becomes a mark of pride and continuance of a certain form of embodiment.

The texts also suggest that the non-recognizable body can be a means not only of connecting one to family history, but to personal history, a symbol of one’s own changing aesthetic and attitudes about one’s body as reflected in one’s appearance. This is implied in “Beard” when the character of the bearded woman recounts a time in her life when she was ashamed to have a beard, saying “for years I hated myself for needing to shave my face.” Her character relates how her ex-husband was the person who “encouraged me to grow a beard” and “supported me in opening my own salon because I couldn’t get a job at any established business unless I had electrolysis. I wanted to keep my beard by then. It was a matter of hard-won pride” (99). To this character, her beard is not only aesthetically pleasing, but a symbol of her shifting
feelings about her non-recognizable body. She has a comfort with her form of embodiment, and finds a pleasure in it she did not have before. Her body becomes a symbol of her own maturing beliefs.

Hollis Seamon suggests a similar idea as Suzanne’s character describes her evolving attitude toward her body. She wanted to lose weight to prove to herself that she could do it and to see how she would look when she was thin, how her body would feel. After she had lost the weight, however, she decided that she was happier as a fat woman and that was the sort of body she wanted to have (216). Seamon posits that the body can be a mark of personal preference, that even though the fat body is not considered recognizable, it is the way that Suzanne’s character has decided she prefers to look, reflecting changes in her own aesthetic and erotic.

These texts also imply that the non-recognizable body can be used in a form of self-erotic, as the bearded woman’s character in “Beard,” Suzanne’s character, and Lois’s character all enjoy how they look and how they are embodied, suggesting the potential of the non-recognizable body to be shaped for one’s own gaze. In particular, McCracken portrays Lois’s character as feeling more comfortable in a non-recognizable body than she did on a recognizable one. Her character says that before she began to be tattooed “I felt like a ghost haunting too much space […] it’s like when you move into a new place, and […] the place doesn’t feel like home and you’re not sure you want to stay […] Well, getting a tattoo—it’s like hangings drapes or laying carpet […] it’s deciding you’ve moved in” (74). Here the text suggests that modifying one’s body to be non-recognizable can be a mark of ownership and discovery of a personal erotic, although marking the body for the self is an ambivalent prospect because personal meaning does not transfer to the outside world and Lois has to cover herself outside the tattoo parlor.
The story “Ears” suggests a similar ambivalence to the display of non-recognizable bodies. The four-eared woman’s character says her ears “seem natural as wings on a butterfly” and she thinks of them as an “accessory” (60). While she does not want to have them removed, at the same time she wears scarves or turtlenecks when she goes outside because she does not want to draw attention. Both texts suggest that the personal aesthetic and personal erotic have to be balanced with the dangers that can come with public display, the knowledge that the non-recognizable body will be hailed as freakish. As Judith Butler writes, when engaging in self-construction, one may not be bound by norms, but one still has to live within the social context of the norms, even while challenging them and trying to create a rupture (114). Along these lines, the texts do not suggest limits to embodiment and the non-recognizable body as much as they suggest that the personal gaze is the safest gaze, while danger as well as power can come from the public gaze. The choice lies in whether or not to accept the danger of having a non-recognizable body.

Another form of personal erotic in these texts is the erotic of bodily experience and the pleasures to be found in being embodied, in looking at the self, and beyond that, the tactile pleasure of being in a body. Hollis Seamon portrays Suzanne’s character as particularly sensual in this regard, reveling in the decadence of sex and food and clothing. She enjoys the “sensation of my thighs squeezing together in stockings, caressing each other under one of my favorite full flowered skirts,” the pleasure of eating rice pudding when she is “rolling each grain of warm plump rice on my tongue,” and her body during sex when her “flesh moves, wave after wave, all around me…From my thighs to my breasts, the waves heave and peak, heave and peak” (216, 218). Seamon reflects the potential of the body to be a space for personal pleasure, a space in which to enjoy being embodied.
Similarly, in “It’s Bad Luck to Die,” Lois’s character begins to appreciate the feeling of her body being tattooed, saying “it didn’t take me long to get used to the feel of the needle. I learned to love it” (66). Her character feels a tactile bodily pleasure in having her body marked, in the sensation of her body changing. Suzanne’s character also expresses a tactile joy in seeing and feeling her body change when she is gaining weight, saying that she “could feel the old familiar flesh gathering about my ribs and thighs” (215).

Both of these texts suggest that one component of the self-erotic can be the process of change. Shaping the body for the gaze of the self, seeing and feeling the body being altered, is a pleasurable process, as these texts imply when the characters shape their bodies not according to the normative framework, but for the gaze of the self, as a sculptor would shape wood or clay. Seeing that transformation is part of the joy. This process primarily takes place in the most private and intimate space, where the self is seen only by the self and can always find a space of recognition. Yet the texts always return the female freaks to public spaces, a reminder that their personal erotic must co-exist with a world in which there is a normative framework and in which the body shaped by their personal erotic may be considered non-recognizable.

The third space in this equation, alongside the public and private spaces of the narrative, is the space outside the story, the space occupied by the reader who is forming her own opinions of the texts and the characters within them. Through inviting the reader into the story of the freak, the texts ask her to consider the recognizability and non-recognizability of bodies, and to conceive of bodies and embodiment differently than she might have before, to consider potentials of the body and definitions of freakishness that are not always realized.
VI. FREAKING THE READER

These are texts that create complex responses in the reader, ones that cause her to question the nature of freakishness and the non-recognizable body, which characters are truly freakish and which are not. The stories complicate the question of freakishness through presenting different kinds of freaks, some which are freakish because they have non-recognizable bodies, and others who commit socially freakish actions. The end result can prove disorienting to the reader, which is one of the most important effects these texts achieve, questioning why certain body practices are considered normal and some are not, why some individuals are recognizably human while others are not. These texts break down barriers between the freakish and the normal, between the recognizable and non-recognizable. By their very nature, the texts function in the same way as the freakish or non-recognizable body, creating ruptures in the norm, spaces for questions, opening up possibilities of being and ways of being embodied, effectively “freaking” the reader.

One way in which the texts accomplish this is by asking on what basis the characters are considered freakish. As Michael Hardin notes of Geek Love, “the [normal and freakish] worlds are interrelated, with ‘norms’ doing horribly freakish things, and ‘freaks’ being painfully normal.” One primary example Hardin gives is that of Vern, who shoots at the freakish Binewski family because they seem very normal, more normal than his home life (338). In the novel, Vern’s wife is described as “sneering” at him and making fun of his job as a produce manager, while his kids are “snorting” at him and watching TV (57). Vern’s character resents the Binewskis for looking more like a real family than his own, so he must try to kill them, which is a perfectly freakish reaction by a normal character upon seeing the normality of the freak family grocery shopping.
In the passage after Vern shoots the freaks, a woman congratulates him for the act, pleased he has attempted murder. While it is apparent her body is not freakish, Dunn describes it in freakish terms to suggest her deformed psyche. “Her long face with incredible peach skin flushed ripe to the dark hairline pursed and spread its peach-crack lips. The teeth, like sweet corn kernels, whitened at him.” As she lauds Vern for the assault, her speech is broken and fragmented, a freakish sort of dialogue. “The window glass vibrated, telling him ‘…solutely right, right you were absolutely…and she was pregnant again…right…you did the…decent right’ (61). Here Dunn suggests that the way bodies are regarded as recognizable and non-recognizable can easily shift, along with the shifting of the normative framework.

In contrast to the freakish-acting “normal” people, Dunn often describes the normal-acting freaks using language that makes their bodies seem much more attractive. When she describes a poster advertising the Binewski Fabulon, Oly’s character says Arty has “his flippers spread angelically” and “his bare skull gleaming and haloed,” almost in the manner of a saint. The twins are depicted in equally complimentary language, “with their long hair smoothed into black buns, slim white arms entwined, pale faces beaming out in shafts from their violet eyes.” In the poster, Oly’s bald head is “tilted charmingly” rather like a cherub as opposed to a hunchbacked dwarf (41). Another way that Dunn plays with definitions of freakish and normal is that Chick, the Binewski child who has the most normal and most recognizable body, is also the most freakish and most powerful because of his telekinesis.

In order for *Geek Love* and the other texts to effectively question the nature of freakishness and non-recognizability, it is also important that these stories have a contemporary context that can serve to ground the reader. The texts present settings and relationship conflicts that are familiar to the reader, problems between siblings and lovers and parents and children, so
that the reader can enter the narrative at a point of identification. It is in this identifiable setting that the freak can be introduced as the unfamiliar component of an otherwise familiar world. In this way the body of the freak is less jarring to the reader, and easier to relate back to what is known. Through following the first-person narratives of the female freaks in these stories, the reader’s sense of disconnection from the narrator because of her freak body is offset by a sense of verisimilitude, as the relationships and family politics described by the freakish females are fairly standard and mundane.

In *Geek Love*, for instance, the unfamiliar freakish body is presented in the context of sibling rivalry. Oly and her brothers and sisters are all competing for love and attention from their parents, and jealous when their father seems to be favoring one child, Chick, over the other children because of what he and his body can do. The reader can more easily enter a conversation about freakishness on the familiar grounds of understanding competition between siblings. Similarly, in “It’s Bad Luck to Die,” the reader can enter the text on the grounds of a love story and of using the body to show affection. The text twists that notion, however, through suggesting that one means of showing affection with the body can be the act of marking the body, that tattooing can endear someone to another person.

The texts challenge the reader by placing the freakish body in spaces where it is recognizable and has a context, even if this space is the space of the personal erotic for the freakish character. Bodies that the reader interprets as non-recognizable at the beginning of the text may become recognizable to her during the course of the reading. Such may be the case with Suzanne and Lois’s characters who narrate the rationality of their bodies during the course of the story. By the end of the story, the reader is lead to question if the body that she originally regarded as non-recognizable is indeed recognizable.
The manner in which the texts present the body and embodiment return our discussion to the issue of defamiliarization discussed in Section Three, in which inversion creates a reversal in which the “normal” characters appear “freakish” and the “freakish” characters become “normal,” as is the case with Janet and Suzanne, and Lois and her mother. These texts suggest different ways to look at the Other, different ways to interpret unfamiliar bodies in a manner that is more expansive and more accepting of difference.

As Janet’s character says in “The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe,” “No one likes to be fat. That’s just a common defense mechanism” (217). While this can be taken to mean a defense of Janet’s thin body while she decries Suzanne’s, it also suggests that no one likes being different, and claiming to enjoy difference is simply a means of alleviating one’s true pain from sticking out and having a non-recognizable body. These are texts that demonstrate an appreciation of difference, a way of re-seeing that implores the reader to re-think the non-recognizable body and ask if that body is indeed non-recognizable. Through freaking the reader, the texts suggests that difference is something that can be embraced as opposed to erased through attempting to say that all bodies are essentially the same.

These are texts that explore what Butler does not, the space that exists between the recognizable and non-recognizable body. These stories examine the possibilities that can be found in bodies that are able to shift between the two, be recognizable or non-recognizable depending on how much of the body is displayed and where it is displayed. We find that the non-recognizable body can be a source of simultaneous power and danger, not merely a site of imprisonment. The female freaks presented in the texts pose the same dangers that Kristeva suggests of the abject body. They stand apart, as objects of the gaze, but do not cease to challenge the bounds of the norm. Suzanne with her sensuous and sexual body, and Lois whose
body becomes a testament to the love she shares with her husband Tiny, are both example of different ways that the body can be experienced. Both serve to demonstrate that the norm is not a static entity but one that changes based on place, time, and culture.

The texts also suggest the importance of the gaze in rupturing the norms, as it is only when the freakish female is seen that she has a chance to create a shift. Such is the case when Suzanne monitors her weight gain at Weight Watchers and threatens Janet’s dogma, and when the four-eared woman allows herself to be displayed and those around her start wearing extra ears, considering them to be an interesting sort of alternative adornment. It is only when the freak is seen that the normative structures can be questioned, only when Suzanne starts to enrich her body, and the four-eared woman reveals her ears, that the viewer can re-see her own body. It is in that moment she can consider what has been cast off in order for her body to be “normal,” and realize that she could be standing there in the gaze, in place of the freak.

These texts suggest the power of the public gaze is a tenuous power, as is the case with Oly and her temporary glory at the Glass House, and Suzanne and the passing erotic power she has over certain men. The texts also reveal the power of the public gaze to be limited in terms of the interpretation of the viewer, as Dunn suggests with Miss Lick’s character who interprets all female bodies in the same way. These texts also imply that the public gaze is a space of simultaneous power and danger, that the female freak can gain power when putting herself in danger, and that it is a necessary risk that must be taken in order to have a chance at rupturing norms. For instance, Hollis Seamon suggests that Suzanne’s body is appreciated by certain men, but at the same time she is displaying herself, she risks rejection from others. Likewise, Miranda’s character is gleeful at being able to display her body, pleased at the shock of her tail,
but at the same time she is objectified by the viewers and put in danger from the gaze of Miss Lick.

The texts imply that the gaze among intimates is equally ambivalent, and that it can be a space of safety for the female freak, or a space of danger at the hands of family members or other intimates who wish to exert control over the female freak’s body. This happens in *Geek Love* when Arty tries to control his sisters’ bodies and their reproductive capabilities, and in “Beard” when the bearded woman tries to control her daughter’s beard. Yet these texts also insinuate that the recognizability of any particular body changes based on audience, and that families can use the body to identify members and kinship relations, and to mark family history and traditions. The family can also serve to redefine recognizability for its members, and can place certain bodies above others, supporting or discouraging certain body types, as happens both in “Beard” and “It’s Bad Luck to Die” when mothers recognize children based on body type. These texts further imply that in these intimate spaces, the body has the potential to be shaped for the self or for other intimates, and given meaning. As Lois and Suzanne’s characters suggest, the process of bodily change can be pleasurable and an important part of the self-erotic.

The texts play with the normative framework and present non-recognizable bodies that have the potential to rupture that framework, but they do not seek to destroy norms entirely. Instead they play with the space of shift between the recognizable and non-recognizable body, suggesting that norms can shift, but that shifts are slow in happening. The space between the recognizable and the non-recognizable is where shifts can take place, where an individual’s perceptions can be challenged, where there is space for “freaking.”

From this point there is yet room to explore the possibilities of embodiment, including different ways of interpreting and conceptualizing of bodies. We should not try to maintain that
all people and all bodies are essentially the same, but find alternate means of understanding
different kinds of bodies and potentials for embodiment, ways that difference can be encouraged
instead of eliminated. There is also room to explore the possibilities of the self-erotic through
bodily change, through seeing the body change, and in the process, seeing how one’s personal
aesthetic is altered. Another space for further exploration is the gap between intimate and public
spaces, how an individual changing her body or her perception of her body is expressed both in
public spaces and in spaces with other intimates, how these small changes can potentially lead to
larger changes and shifts in the norm.
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APPENDIX A

EARS

The second pair of ears are on the sides of my neck. They’re a little smaller than my head ears and can’t actually hear anything. All four ears are pierced, four holes each in the top ones, two holes each in the bottom. Most of the time I forget about the second pair, don’t even notice them when I’m looking in the mirror. When I go out I wear turtlenecks and scarves because I’d rather not be stared at, but when I’m at work at the tattoo parlor I let them show. Customers tend to think they’re some sort of body modification.

I become a tattoo parlor mascot the day my roommate Lee moves out to live with her asshole fiancé. We live on the bottom floor of three-story house–Lee and her daughter share a bedroom, and my son shares a bedroom with me. Lee’s fiancé has stayed the night at our place several times. Her daughter sleeps on the couch then, but usually ends up in bed cuddled next to me because Lee and the asshole fight so loudly. Even in my bedroom with the door closed you can hear the names he calls her. More than once I’ve told Lee that she and Prince Caustic have to keep it down. I don’t want my son or her daughter to be hearing such things. She says the kids are asleep, but I know that’s not true.

By the time Lee is packing her last few belongings I’ve known about the move for two weeks, but it’s still a shock.

‘You can’t move in with that jerk,’ I say for the twentieth time while Lee loads her collection of stuffed animals into a milk crate. ‘He’s abusive.’

‘He’s small,’ she says. Burke is an inch shorter than Lee and maybe ten pounds lighter, but Lee’s body is hunched in the morning after Burke’s been yelling at her. ‘He always feels
like people are challenging his manhood or something. I can’t yell at Burke. It would hurt him too much.’

‘The bastard’s not made of glass,’ I say.

‘We’re going to get counseling,’ she says. ‘He agreed.’

My ex-boyfriend did, too, but I never managed to drag him within a mile of the counselor’s office. It took me six damn years to figure out he was a loser. He’d yell at me one minute and say he loved me the next. He claimed it was stress from his job and from us having a little kid that made him moody. I thought I’d marry him. He was Jacob’s dad after all. Jake was three when we moved out. I had to do it while my ex was at work. We’ve been living with Lee ever since.

Lee is thirty-four and can barely read, convinces Jake or her daughter Izzy to help her understand her mail. I think she has some form of dyslexia and I’m not sure how she managed to graduate high school, but Lee is determined to a fault and won’t get tested for a learning disability. She says she gets along well enough, but I know she’s too embarrassed to admit to anything. That’s why she’s been working third shift at the auto parts factory for sixteen years. That’s why she hates dating. It involves someone else finding out she can’t read. Burke is Lee’s first boyfriend since Izzy’s dad left six years ago and moved to California. I’m pretty sure part of the reason they broke up was because she refused to get help and he refused to keep reading everything to her.

Burke is impossibly sweet and kind when it comes to helping Lee, reads her mail and books and magazines aloud, and follows under the print with his finger so she can pretend she’s reading along with him. I don’t understand these men we choose, how they can be so sweet
about one thing, the thing that is most painful, but they’re bastards about everything else. Lee and me, we both want to hold onto that drop of sweetness, but it nearly kills us in the process. Izzy is clinging to her bed, refusing to leave.

‘I want to stay here,’ she yells. ‘I won’t go live in his stupid apartment. It smells funny. I hate Burke.’

‘Everything is going to be fine,’ says Lee, putting her hand over her daughter’s fingers, probably in the hopes of easing them off the mattress. ‘You’ll have your own bedroom and a new daddy.’

‘That jerk is not going to be my daddy,’ yells Izzy.

I’m tempted to stay and see how Lee resolves this dilemma, but Jacob and I have to get to the tattoo parlor. I work Tuesday through Saturday eleven to five, take a dinner break and go back with Jake at six-thirty. We stay ‘til nine-thirty on school nights, eleven on the weekends. Lee waves good-bye to us and promises Izzy the moon if she’d only sit up.

At the tattoo parlor I work the register, do bookkeeping, sterilize equipment, and draw tattoos. My boss Zip is great at tracing pictures on skin and getting the colors right, but says he can’t draw worth shit. Jacob climbs up on a red leather stool and sits still as a sphinx while Zip inks half a birch tree on some guy’s back. Zip doesn’t have a wife or kids and likes Jake, has already told me Jake can come to the tattoo parlor after school instead of going home to wait for me. I’d rather not let Jake be a latchkey kid, and I figure watching people get tattooed is just as educational as anything he could see on TV.

For months Zip has been asking me if he can use my face to advertise the tattoo parlor. He’s a good guy and never pressured me about it, but he’s mentioned the possibility from time to time. I’ve never been desperate enough to sell my picture before, but now I’ve got to figure out
how to cover twice the usual rent plus make car payments and add to Jake’s college fund. So with Lee and Izzy on the road to Burke’s, I agree to be the store’s mascot.

“You won’t be a mascot,” Zip says. He’s finished inking the tree and is sponging ink and blood off the guy’s back. The guy grits his teeth. Jake stares. “You’ll be more like an emblem or insignia,” says Zip.

Of course this is just a nice way of saying mascot.

Zip says he’ll get an artist to do a black-and-white drawing of me and give me an extra hundred dollars every month in royalties, plus fifty percent of the profits from the sale of any merchandise with my face on it.

“I get to choose who draws the new logo and paints it on the front window,” I tell Zip, hoping that calling it a logo will make it seems less like it’s my face. “You can use it on t-shirts and business cards. That’s as far as I’ll go.” I have a certain pride in how I look, but don’t want to be on a bumper sticker or book of matches or inked on someone’s arm.

Zip snaps off his rubber gloves and scratches his nearly invisible blond goatee.

“What about bottle openers?” he says.

“No dice,” I say.

“Story in the paper?” he says.

I shrug. “If they care to do one,” I say. I’m not figuring they will, but I’ve never been a good guesser.

Four weeks later Zip’s photo is on page seven of the local paper. He’s standing in front of the tattoo parlor beside my three-foot-high head, holding a t-shirt with the store logo on it.
Me. I have to admit it came out rather nice – my black and white face looks cheerful, even attractive, and the four ears seem natural as wings on a butterfly.

Monday afternoon I’m standing in the driveway washing my car and not wearing a turtleneck or scarf, when the lady appears at my side. Or at least it seems like she appears. She probably just walks right up to me like any normal person but I don’t hear her because I’m thinking about Lee and Izzy and how they moved out a month ago and I haven’t heard from them in a couple weeks. The last time I spoke with Lee on the phone she said things were just fine and Izzy was getting used to the situation. I took that to mean she hadn’t yet tried to kill Burke.

‘Are you a harlot?’ The lady beside me is plump, has short brown hair permed in loose curls, is wearing jeans and a pink t-shirt and carrying a lawn chair. She is vaguely familiar, like I might have seen her at the grocery.

‘I haven’t had sex in six years,’ I say. Not since I left the ex and swore off men. I think Zip may have a thing for me but he’s my boss and too nice a guy to try anything.

‘You might be a sign of the apocalypse,’ says the lady. ‘Perhaps you should have been killed at birth.’

I try to not take the last comment personally as she stands tiptoe and scrutinizes my forehead.

‘Do you mind? I’m washing my car.’ I swat at her with the damp sponge and she steps back but doesn’t leave.

‘I’ve spoken with the angels,’ she says. ‘They said you may be a sign of the end.’

‘So?’ I say and dip my sponge back in the bucket of suds. ‘They could have meant the end of jelly donuts or something.’

‘But the end is near,’ she says. ‘I knew it the moment I saw your picture in the paper.’
'I’m thirty-one for God’s sake,’ I say, ‘I have a kid. I’m not a harbinger of destruction.’

The lady nods but sets up her lawn chair beside the sidewalk, takes a small pad of paper from her purse, and watches me with her head tilted slightly. I give her fifteen minutes of polite silence before I say anything else.

‘How long are you going to sit there?’ I ask.

‘Until I get a sign,’ she says.

‘I don’t appreciate being stared at,’ I say.

The lady bites her lip. ‘This is nothing personal against you,’ she says.

‘Pardon me for feeling so goddamned insulted,’ I mutter and resume washing the dead bugs off my windshield. I remind myself I’m used to worse than this.

In elementary school at recess I stood by the chain link fence with three other outcasts. The smart girl insulted all the other kids in polysyllabic words. The fat boy had the best spitting range and accuracy of any kid in the fourth grade. The six-foot-tall girl was only teased from a distance because she had a great left hook. We moved after I finished eighth grade. When I started high school my mother bought me a lot of scarves and turtlenecks. She said there was nothing wrong with me but with the rest of the world. Around then I realized my parents probably just didn’t have the money for surgery to get the ears off.

Jake’s dad and I started going out during my senior year in high school. After three years of hiding the second ears under layers of cloth, I let him be the first person outside of my family to see them. He loved my ears, thought they were beautiful, said I should show them off in public. Of course after a few beers he’d call me a lazy cunt and a good-for-nothing bitch, but even when drunk he never made any mean comments about my ears. I never understood how he managed to hold me up and destroy me at the same time.
The strange woman is still staking out our yard from her lawn chair when Jake gets home from school.

‘Hello, Mrs. Simon,’ he says to her. He gives me a hug, goes inside.

I glance at the woman scratching notes on her pad, drop my sponge in the bucket, follow my son.

‘You know that lady?’ I say.

‘Her son is in my class,’ says Jacob. ‘Isaiah.’ He tells me all the kids tease Isaiah because his mother stands on a corner between the school and post office downtown and tells everyone the world is going to end. She’s been doing this since school started.

‘Sometimes we sit across the street and watch,’ he says. ‘People driving by yell at her, but she doesn’t shut up. Isaiah’s mad at her because his dad divorced her a year ago after she went crazy. Now she lives in a yucky apartment and his dad sends her money every month and she doesn’t do anything but yell at people. Isaiah has to stay with her every other week. He hates it.’

But Jacob tells me odd things have happened. Mrs. Simon said a light would fall from the sky and the next day a streetlight cable broke and one of the lamps almost landed on a car windshield. She said it would be a time of monsters the day before Isaiah’s dog had puppies, and the smallest one in the litter only had three legs. She said there would be an end to joy and a week later the bakery down the street from the school closed.

‘The lady who worked there gave us free two-day-old cookies,’ says Jacob. ‘Now we have to buy them from Shop Rite and they’re not as good.’
After listening to Jake I decide not to call the police about Mrs. Simon. At least not yet. You can’t go through life with four ears and not have compassion for people who get mocked or called crazy, even if you think they might really be crazy.

Tuesday when Jake and I get home from the tattoo parlor for dinner, Mrs. Simon is already stationed on our lawn in her chair.

Jacob waves and says hello. She smiles at both of us. I try to smile back but it probably looks more like a grimace. We eat macaroni and cheese in the kitchen, and from my place at the table I can see her out our living room window. She doesn’t do much other than take notes and look at her watch. There’s extra macaroni and cheese and since I don’t like it reheated I consider letting Jake take it out to her. In the end I put it down the garbage disposal. Mrs. Simon waves when we leave for the tattoo parlor. You could almost think she was a kindly neighbor sunning herself instead of a second-rate prophetess.

‘Lady,’ I say, ‘I don’t want to be mean, but you realize I could call the authorities and register a stalking complaint.’

Mrs. Simon cocks her head. ‘But I’m not hurting you,’ she says. ‘I’m just taking notes.’

‘And I’m not calling the police,’ I say, scratching the ear on the right side of my neck. ‘Not yet. I just wanted to let you know.’

Mrs. Simon looks down and scribbles more in her pad.

Jake crosses his arms once we’re in the car. ‘She’s really kind of nice,’ he says. ‘Just crazy.’
I shake my head. I guess being stalked by nice crazy people is better than being stalked by mean crazy people, but stalking is stalking. It takes me a while to focus once I get back to the parlor. When I start playing around with a few tattoo sketches I feel a bit better.

Around eight in the evening two college-aged girls with multiple piercings in their ears bounce into the shop.

‘You’re the woman on the window,’ they bubble. ‘Can we get a picture?’

I blink at them a couple times then glance over to Jake. He’ll probably want to take swimming lessons at the Y once school lets out, and he’s going to need new summer clothes. I look back at the girls and tell them it will cost two dollars. The girls whip out a little camera and Jake takes the photo since Zip is inking an apple onto some lady’s ankle. The girls both hug me and tell me my ears are really cool. Then they buy shirts. It feels nice to be appreciated and yet rather disturbing, like I’m some sort of pop star.

Thirty shirts have sold in the past few days and Zip says he’ll have to order more from the supplier. At least my slight celebrity is profitable. Zip is good to his word on my extra cash, gives me a hundred dollars plus another two hundred from the t-shirt sales. I treat Jacob to ice cream on the way home.

‘I want a shirt with your picture on it, too,’ says Jake.

‘No,’ I tell him.

‘But a couple kids at school have them,’ he says. ‘And you’re my mom. If anyone gets a shirt it should be me.’

‘You need to be wearing shirts with sports team names or something,’ I say. ‘Not me.’

‘But you’re better than any stupid sports team,’ he says. ‘I want a shirt with you on it.’

‘We’ll see,’ I say, which is what my mother said when she meant no.
Jake knows this and kicks lightly at the dashboard as he licks his ice cream.

Mrs. Simon reappears in her lawn chair on Wednesday afternoon, has her pad, a can of cola, and a sandwich in a plastic bag. She watches while Jake and I play Frisbee in the yard. Jake asks if she’d like to join us. She smiles and shakes her head no and scribbles more notes.

When we go inside to eat dinner, Jake says, ‘She made good cookies for Isaiah’s birthday treat last month. We should ask her to bring some next time she comes.’ I decide it’s not a bad idea, send Jake outside with his request. It’s the least she can do since she keeps staring at me.

Wednesday night Izzy calls the tattoo parlor and asks if she can come back and live with me. She says things at Burke’s are awful.

‘Has he yelled at you?’ I say.

‘He yells at Mom and she defends him,’ says Izzy. ‘She says he’s the only really understanding guy she’s ever met. It’s a load of shit.’

‘Is your mom home?’ I say.

‘She just left for work,’ says Izzy. ‘That’s why I called you now.’

‘I need to talk to her about this,’ I say.

‘You know she won’t listen to you,’ says Izzy.

I bite my lip and say I’ll call Lee tomorrow.

On Thursday I phone Lee on my lunch break, maybe not the best idea because I think I wake her up.

I say Izzy called me. ‘She’s not happy.’

‘She’s adjusting,’ says Lee.
‘She says Burke still yells at you,’ I say. ‘I thought you guys were going to start counseling.’

‘We will when he can work it into his schedule,’ says Lee. ‘Everyone is adjusting now. Izzy is learning what it’s like to have a dad again, and Burke is figuring out how he needs to act around kids. They’ll be good for each other. He’s helped me so much, you know. No other guy has ever done that. Izzy just needs to give him a chance. She’ll be fine.’

Lee hangs up the phone.

I think about calling her back but I don’t. I know she’s a stubborn woman, won’t listen. And I hate telling others how to parent.

Thursday afternoon Jake and I find Mrs. Simon in her chair on our lawn with a paper plate on her lap filled with chocolate chip and sugar cookies. She hands me the plate cheerfully while telling me that my second set of ears look slightly pointed at the ends and that’s probably a bad sign. I thank her for the cookies.

At work we have sold almost one hundred shirts. People are popping in and out of the store, wanting to get photos with me and paying five dollars for the privilege. The fuss is strange because I’ve been working at the parlor for a few years and nothing like this has ever happened. Zip says I was just keeping too low a profile and not to doubt the power of merchandizing.

The annoying part is when people take pictures of me without permission. Tonight I’m near the back of the shop sterilizing equipment and all of the sudden there’s a flash like lightning and some college guy is hightailing it out of the store.

‘Asshole,’ I yell and glance over to Zip who winces and looks at the floor. I glare at my black and white image on the tattoo parlor window. Before Jake and I leave, Zip gives me a large check for shirt royalties. It’s money Jake and I need, so I don’t press the issue further. I
tell myself things will get better, that all the stupid publicity will die down soon and I’ll still get my extra hundred a month.

Friday afternoon Mrs. Simon has moved closer to the house, is halfway between the sidewalk and the porch.

‘Other people live here, too,’ I tell her. ‘They might have problems with you taking over our lawn.’

‘But I’m not hurting anything,’ says Mrs. Simon, knitting her eyebrows like sitting in the middle of our yard should be the most natural thing in the world.

‘I don’t care,’ I say, walking around her and grabbing the arms of her lawn chair, heaving back with my whole weight. I can’t budge her. She’s too heavy.

‘That’s it,’ I say, stomping around the chair to face her. ‘I’m calling the police.’

‘Mom,’ Jake says, ‘she gave us cookies.’

‘The cookies were very good,’ I say, ‘but this is an invasion of privacy. Mine and my son’s. I could file a harassment charge and get you arrested without much trouble.’

‘I’ll move,’ she says, ‘I’ll move.’ Mrs. Simon stands up and touches the back of her chair, looks at me with sad eyes. ‘But don’t you understand I’m trying to help people? I’m making them aware.’ She sounds genuinely hurt and I can’t help but feel a little sad for her.

‘You need to understand that I need my lawn,’ I say quietly.

Mrs. Simon turns and drags her chair back to the sidewalk. She doesn’t look at me or Jake when we leave. Jake grumbles for a while about Mrs. Simon’s cookies and our chances of getting more of them, but Zip gives him a sheet of temporary tattoos and my son invests the rest of the evening putting them all over his arms.
Jake spends Saturday afternoon with me at the tattoo parlor. When we get home for dinner at five, Mrs. Simon and Izzy are sitting on the front porch, chatting. Izzy has a suitcase.

‘I can’t stand it there,’ she says. ‘Last night I hit Burke when he yelled at Mom. He hit me back and Mom yelled at both of us to cut it out. I called him a bag of rat shit and he called me a little cunt. He grabbed my arms and shook me, then I gave him a shiner.’

Izzy pushes up the sleeve of her t-shirt to reveal four dark oval blotches.

‘Oh God.’ I slump against the porch railing. ‘Is your mom home? Does she know you’re here?’

Izzy shakes her head. ‘She was taking a nap when I left.’

I call Lee and tell her Izzy’s at my place. I don’t have time to ask her what the hell she’s thinking living with a child abuser before she slams down the receiver. Ten minutes later Lee pulls into our driveway, erupts from the car with her hair uncombed and makeup smeared. Burke steps out of the passenger side, stands beside the car with his hands in his pockets. He’s wearing dark glasses and is smaller than I remember, maybe five foot four. He glances down and toes the pavement. Just looking at him you wouldn’t think he was a bastard who hit kids.

‘You scared the shit out of me,’ Lee says. ‘I woke up and you weren’t there. Get your ass in the car right now.’

‘Not until you break up with Burke,’ says Izzy. ‘He treats you like shit.’ Izzy glares over her mother’s shoulder at the accountant. She’s almost as big as Burke, and stockier.

‘What the hell is this about Burke hitting Izzy?’ I say.

‘They slap like kids,’ Lee says. ‘It’s not bad.’

‘It’s a grown man hitting a twelve-year-old,’ I say.
‘He didn’t hit,’ says Lee, ‘he just grabbed her arms. Izzy shouldn’t have been in the room, anyway. When Burke is mad he says things he doesn’t mean.’

Mrs. Simon squints at Lee and Burke in turn.

‘I don’t care,’ says Izzy. ‘He’s not going to be my dad, and you’re not going to be my mom if you marry him.’

Lee grabs Izzy’s wrist and tries to haul her off the porch, but Izzy hardly budges.

‘Lee,’ I say, ‘let her stay the night if she wants.’

Lee doesn’t stop tugging. Mrs. Simon bounds up and grabs Izzy’s other arm, pulls her toward the house.

‘What the hell,’ says Lee.

‘She doesn’t want to go,’ says Mrs. Simon. ‘It’s not a good place for her.’

Lee stomps off the porch and back to the car. ‘One night,’ she calls to Izzy, ‘but you’ll have to come home tomorrow.’

Izzy clenches her jaw as her mother and the bastard drive away.

Jake and I are both hungry and there’s not much time before I have to be back to work, so I microwave a couple frozen pizzas. Izzy drags her suitcase inside the house and Mrs. Simon, good to her word, slinks back to the sidewalk. Even though I’m hesitant about it, I invite Mrs. Simon to eat with us because I’m happy she helped get Lee to leave. Mrs. Simon wanders around the kitchen while the pizzas are cooking, peers into cupboards and drawers. I wonder what the hell she could be looking for, if she thinks my silverware may give her clues about my true nature, but when she finds the plates in the cupboard she sets the table.

While Mrs. Simon is busy I think about calling child protective services, flip through the phone book until I find the number. I scribble it down on a notepad and stare at it for several
seconds, but in the end I don’t call. I can’t. Izzy is safe now, and maybe this is the sort of wake-up call Lee needs to leave Burke on her own. Shouldn’t it mean something to her that her daughter has run away? But I recall too well how hard it is to leave a guy you think you love, even if he treats you like shit. For six years I stayed with my boyfriend, despite his hard words. I told myself things would get better. I told myself Jake needed a dad. I finger the ear on the left side of my neck. My boyfriend really loved those ears. I miss that.

At dinner Mrs. Simon and I let the kids talk about school while we give each other sideways glances. I take Izzy and Jake to the parlor in the evening. Izzy brought half of her clothes and her school books, so she’s set for a few days. In the car she tells us what Mrs. Simon told her as they sat together in our yard, how she started seeing little pinprick lights about a year and a half ago, started sensing things were going to happen before they did, started being struck with messages.

‘The streetlight did fall down,’ says Jake. ‘It was cool. Glass everywhere, like an explosion.’

That night I make up the couch bed for Izzy who frets over her mother.

‘Maybe she won’t come back,’ Izzy says. ‘Burke hates me. I hate him. I want to stay here for good.’

‘I don’t know how much I can do since I’m not your mom,’ I tell Izzy. Unless I call child protective services. But Lee helped Jake and me when I left Jake’s father, when we didn’t really have anywhere else to go. I don’t want to see her prosecuted.

‘Even Mrs. Simon makes more sense than Mom does,’ Izzy mutters.

I bite my lip.
I have Sunday and Monday off work. Because I can’t stand the thought of watching Mrs. Simon in the front yard all day, I take the kids to the zoo after lunch. We have dinner out and go see a movie, get home at nine-thirty. There’s a message from Lee on the answering machine. She says Izzy can stay with us for a couple of days, and I figure Lee is feeling guilty because deep down she knows Burke is an idiot. I also figure Burke wants a break from Izzy.

Monday the kids walk to school together. I go grocery shopping and to the Laundromat, come home just before they get back. When they walk in the door, both of them are wearing plastic ears on the sides of their neck. Izzy’s are pink and Jake’s are green. They show me how they attach with little adhesive strips.

‘We got them at the drugstore,’ says Izzy. ‘Everyone at school is wearing them now. They have all colors. Pink and blue and red and green.’

‘Oh Lord,’ I say. ‘Take them off.’

‘No,’ says Jake, touching his green ears with the tips of his fingers, pressing them against his neck. ‘They’re cool. I like them. They’re like yours.’

‘My ears are not toys,’ I say, stepping toward him. ‘Take them off.’

‘We paid a dollar for them,’ says Jake, clamping his hands over the green ears as if they are hearing some awful sound his other ears can’t.

‘All the kids are wearing them,’ Izzy repeats.

‘God,’ I say, leaning my head against the doorframe. The kids glare at me, their arms crossed, their ears bright. I shake my head. Dammit. I always said I’d be the sort of parent who wouldn’t care about dyed hair, tattoos, or piercings. Even though I don’t like the ears, I let the kids keep them on. They can be removed. And I’ve always tried to think of my own ears as
something of an accessory. It would be funny if I weren’t pissed, didn’t have to fight the urge to swipe Jake’s ears off his neck when he walks past me in the kitchen.

Mrs. Simon and a little boy arrive at our house around four-thirty. I figure the boy is Isaiah. Jacob waves to him and they start playing Frisbee in the yard. Izzy talks with Mrs. Simon on the porch, keeps glancing at driveway like her mother and Burke are going to materialize.

‘You were right to leave that place,’ says Mrs. Simon to Izzy, but she looks at me and squints hard, like since I’m a sign of the second coming I should have the power to right things.

*Sorry lady, I think. I’m not as magical as I look.*

Even if Lee hasn’t left Burke yet, Izzy is safe and that’s what matters for now.

Tuesday afternoon at the tattoo parlor, people with plastic ears filter through the store to get pictures with me. After the eighth or ninth photo it starts to get annoying. Part of me feels like I’m being appreciated. Part of me feels like I’m being mocked. Zip stares at the plastic ears and I tell him about the ones Izzy and Jake were wearing. Zip nods and rubs his hands together. I know tonight he’s going to make a few calls, find a plastic ear supplier. Izzy and Jake arrive at the parlor still wearing their extra ears. I don’t think they took them off for bed last night.

When we arrive home for dinner, Mrs. Simon and Isaiah are on the porch. I give them a nod and troop inside. Izzy chats with Mrs. Simon and I hear them through the open window.

Mrs. Simon says, ‘That’s how he’s going to be known, as the kid whose mother tells the future. That’s what I’m giving him. Maybe he’ll have a gift, too.’

I shake my head, keep my fingers crossed that Isaiah can just live down his mother’s reputation. Everything she says sounds so earnest, I can’t help but feel bad for her. Maybe she
really thinks this is a good thing for Isaiah. But she doesn’t hear the playground teasing. Or she ignores it well.

Back at the tattoo parlor Lee troops in around seven. Izzy locks herself in the restroom in back. Lee knocks on the door until her knuckles are red.

‘Dammit,’ she says, ‘you need to come home. Things are going to get better. They are getting better. Burke and I are going to counseling next week.’

‘No, you’re not,’ I say, leaning against the wall by the bathroom door.

‘If that bastard yells at you again I’m going to punch him even harder,’ says Izzy.

‘Counseling,’ says Lee, pounding on the door. ‘I’m going to make an appointment.’

‘That’s bullshit,’ Izzy says. ‘You said you’d make an appointment last week and the asshole said no way in hell was he going.’

Lee gives up after a half-hour, has to get to work. She’s near hoarse and Zip is giving her dark looks, says she’s going to scare away customers.

I watch her leave. On the way out she passes three people with plastic ears coming in.

By Thursday morning the ear trend is all over town. At the grocery store there are little kids, toddlers, with tiny ears on the sides of their necks. Even some of their mothers have two sets of ears. Elementary school kids running past the tattoo parlor window on their way home have two sets of ears. Half of our customers are wearing them, too. It’s so pervasive that the ears start looking normal to me. Expected. When the kids and I get home, Isaiah and mother are in the front yard arguing about ears.

‘I don’t understand why I can’t wear them,’ he says. He has his fists clenched. Mrs. Simon is trying to pry his hands open and not having much success. Isaiah writhes out of her
grasp, tucks his fists close to his chest, and pretty soon he’s in a tight ball on our lawn. Mrs. Simon looks down at him, frowns and shakes her head, hands on hips.

When she sees me and the kids, she blushes.

‘Isaiah,’ she says, ‘you need to stand up.’

‘No,’ he says, his voice muffled since he’s in a tiny ball. ‘Not until you let me wear my ears. Not until you stop standing on the corner and yelling things and making the kids laugh. Not until you get a real job and move out of the stupid apartment. I hate you.’

‘We’ll talk about this later,’ she says. ‘There are people here. Jake. Your friend.’

Isaiah raises his head, sees Jake, uncurls from his ball and runs toward my son.

Mrs. Simon watches him, hands on hips, says, ‘I’m sorry about that,’ to me.

Mothers embarrass their kids. Kids embarrass their mothers. Such is life. I shrug. By the time I call the kids in for dinner, Jake has helped Isaiah attach the ears to the sides of his neck. Mrs. Simon mutters something about the devil under her breath but doesn’t make him take the ears off.

Friday afternoon the middle-aged guy comes in with his camera and starts taking pictures of me. I stare at him for a moment. Most people realize their audacity and stop photographing me when I glare. Not this one. He snaps six photos then turns around. I think he’s going to leave, but he starts taking picture of Jake sitting on his red stool.

‘Hey,’ I say, ‘my kid is off limits.’ I march over to my son but the paunchy guy is still clicking away, gets a couple of pictures of me and Jake before I get between them.
'Quit it,' I say, but the guy skirts to the side a bit, gets shots of us both before he puts down his camera. I’m trying to decide if I should lunge for the camera or not when he fishes in his jeans pocket and hands me a twenty, then tousles Jake’s hair.

‘Thanks,’ he says cheerfully.

Maybe if it were the 1920’s and I were in a sideshow with fat ladies and bearded ladies and skeleton women, I would be fine with the fact he doesn’t ask to take pictures, just gives me cash and figures that makes everything okay. Even now, maybe if I didn’t have a kid I wouldn’t mind weirdoes like him as long as I was paid enough to be on display. But I do have a kid. I am a mother. And mothers do a lot of things because of their children that they wouldn’t do otherwise. I left my boyfriend because I was worried about the effect it would have on Jake to hear his mother called all those awful names. And now middle-aged men are patting my son’s head like Jake is just another exhibit.

I lose it.

‘You are not fucking touching my kid.’ I wrest the camera from his hand and grab his arm, grip hard enough to make him wince and writhe and clutch at the air trying to escape.

‘Lady,’ he yelps, ‘you’re hurting me.’

The middle aged man is bigger than me, maybe six foot and two hundred pounds to my five foot four and one-twenty, so I’m not quite sure how I manage to haul him past Zip, four staring customers, and thirty feet of wall covered with tattoo flash pictures. Must be adrenalin.

I fling him out the door and throw the camera after him. It cracks against the sidewalk.

‘To hell with it,’ I tell Zip. ‘This is it. No more shirts. No more logo.’

Izzy and Jake and I take all the shirts and there’s nothing Zip can do about it. Of course there are already lots of ears and shirts in circulation and I can’t do a damn thing about that, but I
can stop more from being sold. Kids and mothers and tattoo shop patrons will wear the ears for another week or two until everyone has them, until they look so normal they are old, and then everyone will move on to the next fad.

When we arrive home, Lee and Burke are standing beside Lee’s car in the driveway. Mrs. Simon and Isaiah are at the edge of the driveway, maybe five paces away from them, and Mrs. Simon has her hands on her hips. Lee marches up to Izzy as soon as she gets out of the car, grabs her daughter’s arm.

‘Honey, you need to come home,’ says Lee, tugging.

‘Not if you’re going to put up with all that shit from that bastard,’ says Izzy.

‘Don’t talk to me like that,’ says Lee.

‘He does,’ says Izzy, glaring at Burke. ‘Just learn to read already. It’s not some big fucking secret that you can’t.’

‘I love Burke,’ says Lee, but her throat catches.

‘He gave me fucking bruises,’ says Izzy.

‘A great storm will strike you down,’ Mrs. Simon says to Burke.

Burke fidgets.

‘Your wealth will be consumed,’ Mrs. Simon says. ‘Your stone heart will be crushed.’

Lee glances at Burke. Izzy glares at him. Lee tugs harder and Izzy’s feet slip just a bit, a couple paces closer to the car, and I’m wondering how long they will keep this up, who will win out, and I hope it’s not Lee. Izzy should not be going back to Burke’s, whether or not he’s afraid of her. Mrs. Simon grabs Izzy’s other arm and she and Lee are both tugging.

For a very brief moment I’m certain that my second pair of ears can hear the voices of angels. Maybe it is the brightness of the sun in my eyes but I see Lee with many ears on her
neck and chest and arms, plastic ears that don’t hear. I see her skin pocked with closed eyes.

But as I say, the sun is bright and what I think I see only lasts a moment.

I take a deep breath because Lee is my friend. Because she is a mother. Because I want to believe she is trying to do what’s right for her child. But she’s not. I walk over to Lee and she smiles at me like she thinks I’m going to talk with Izzy and tell her to go back to Burke’s.

‘If you try to take her,’ I say, ‘I’m going to call child protective services.’

Lee’s eyes are huge. ‘God.’ She drops Izzy’s arm. ‘You’re my friend. You’re supposed to support me on this.’

I shake my head.

Mrs. Simon lets go of Izzy’s other arm. Izzy steps toward her and Isaiah and Jake, their plastic ears bright on the sides of their necks.

‘Come on,’ Lee calls over her shoulder to Burke. ‘We have to get her home. She’s our daughter. You said you’d help me do this.’

Burke toes the ground and doesn’t move.

‘Come on,’ she says again, but he is still.

Lee looks from me to Izzy to Mrs. Simon to Burke. She drops to her knees on our lawn, her elbows on the grass, her head on the grass, her hair spread out like a dark halo against the green. She is shaking, crying, and when I squint I can see her trying to cover her many ears, her many eyes, with one pair of hands.
APPENDIX B

MR. CHICKEN

I’m taking inventory in the walk-in freezer, have my hat and gloves on and am counting packages of sandwich buns, when one of my employees barrels through the door to tell me Mr. Chicken is back. She shivers in her green Golden Lotus blouse, grabs my elbow, drags me from the freezer.

“I can’t very well do much about him,” I say, taking off my hat.

“But he scares us,” she says. “You’re the manager. Manage him.”

By the time she and I reach the front counter, Mr. Chicken already has his first box of chicken bits in hand and is waddling back to a table to start eating. I don’t know who first started calling him Mr. Chicken. Probably one of the high school boys who works the fryers. Mr. Chicken is maybe fifty years old, balding, has salt and pepper hair, wears a white shirt and dark pants and a tie. He weighs about five hundred pounds and his stomach avalanches over his waistband like the extra is going to drop off at any moment.

Mr. Chicken’s gaze wanders around the room, staring hard at Golden Lotus customers and employees alike. We all watch his ritual from the corners of our eyes. He eats the first box of chicken bits then returns to the counter and orders a second twenty-piece box, lumbers back to his table and eats them all. He returns a third time, a fourth, a fifth, until he has eaten one hundred chicken bits. Then he orders a cherry turnover. An apple one. A vanilla fried ice cream. A chocolate. We watch him for twenty-five minutes. The way he keeps eating is scary, mechanical. Some of my employees think he must have four stomachs like a cow, that he’s not really human. In the past month, more than a few customer survey cards have come back with “Get rid of the weird fat guy” written in the comments section.
Mr. Chicken stares at two little kids sitting at the next table until they cry. There is no
to say something to him. I scratch the stubble on my chin.
I’m not a very big woman and I like to go by the traditional idea that the customer is always
right, but upsetting children is going too far. I take a deep breath and plod into the dining room
area toward his table, hear my employees hold their collective breath.

“Pardon me sir,” I say. “I’m the manager at this restaurant.”

Mr. Chicken stares at me. “The food’s fine. Good food.”

I don’t know why I get mad at the staring. His eyes are a little sad, a little angry, a little
like they’re daring me to do something.

“Some of our customers reported that you were looking at them intensely,” I say in my
most polite manager voice. “They worried if you were okay.”

Mr. Chicken stuffs the end of a cherry turnover in his mouth. “This a restaurant or a
shrink’s office?”

“Those kids you were staring at got upset,” I say.

“Not my fault.” Mr. Chicken wipes his mouth with a napkin. He smells of sweat and
grease.

“I see,” I say. “Thank you for your time, sir. I hope you continue to enjoy your meal.”

I trudge behind the counter feeling rather like an idiot. All of my employees are biting
their lips. I was unable to save them from the stares of Mr. Chicken. But I don’t feel right
kicking someone out of the restaurant and I’m too stressed to be assertive. I had an awful date
last night. James. We’d been out three times before and after dinner I figured I had to tell him
that I was a closeted bearded lady. Because I’m blonde and shave every morning it’s really not
noticeable, but relationships are always a problem. I explained the beard to James as we sat side
by side on the couch in my apartment. He stared at me, then said he had to leave. When I asked about another date, he said that if he wanted to date someone who shaved his face he’d date a guy. Of course it hurt. Of course I cried after he left. But I’ve heard worse. Women with beards are scary. We cross that line between masculine and feminine. Maybe the men I date figure I’m going to run around hammering nails and fixing toilets and lifting weights and doing all of those stereotypical guy things and make them feel like pussies. Or at least less like guys.

Mr. Chicken lumbers out of Golden Lotus at two-thirty and my employees breathe a collective sigh of relief.

“Can’t you call the police on him or something?” says one of the guys who works the drive-through.

I try because I’m not sure what else to do. The dispatcher’s “hello” sounds bored and unhelpful but I tell her the story anyway, how there’s a man staring at the customers in my restaurant and I’m not sure what to do.

“I’d like to take legal action,” I say.

“Is he disturbing the peace?” she says.

“Not really,” I say. “He’s quiet, but he’s making little kids cry.”

“We can’t do much about that ma’am,” says the dispatcher, “not unless your fat man is trying to eat somebody.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I say.

“If he’s really fat,” she says, “you could sell tickets.”

I relay the call to my employees who are not amused. My afternoon is only mildly redeemed because I get to take off work a little early at four so I can make it to my haircut at Hairyette’s by six. Even though Hairyette’s is two hours away it’s worth the drive. My stylist,
the only other bearded lady I know, has a beautiful silky brown beard that she keeps neatly trimmed.

“I keep hoping you’ll come back with a lovely blonde beard,” she says while she shampoos my hair.

“It looks good on you,” I say. “It would look silly on me.”

“You need to try it,” she says, wrapping a towel around my head. “Get used to it.”

I tell her about James so she can give me sympathy.

“You have to grow out the beard and then start looking,” she says. “Some men love beards. My ex-husband for instance. Now there was a man who always said, ‘If I can have a beard, my wife might as well have one, too.’”

“But he’s your ex,” I say.

“Honey,” she says, “there’s a lot more to a marriage than facial hair issues.”

I nod, but in the end it’s too easy to shave every morning and keep myself looking normal. One of my ex-boyfriends suggested electrolysis, but it’s too expensive, too painful, and I’m afraid of scaring. I might end up in a worse place than I am already.

I feel better after the haircut at least, good enough to visit Mr. Yamoto and give him the weekly report on the restaurant. Mr. Yamoto owns Golden Lotus, cooked there for a number of years before his joint pain got too bad. He doesn’t get out of the apartment much now, weighs about three hundred fifty pounds, but says he used to be two hundred pounds heavier. He was a sumo wrestler back in Japan, a celebrity, but after he injured his ankle and retired his fan club dissolved, the letters slowed to a trickle. He wallowed in a thick depression for a few months before deciding to come to America. Once he whispered to me that the restaurant saved him.
“Cooking,” he says. “That was the answer.” He designed the menu to be based around tempura fried foods. Everything is lightly battered and then bathed in hot oil, which explains why many of our regular customers aren’t that much smaller than Mr. Chicken, although they are quite a bit nicer.

When I get to Mr. Yamoto’s apartment he nods at me, a tiny bow, and invites me in for really strong Japanese coffee. As we sip I tell him I’m not going out with James anymore. Mr. Yamoto turns his coffee cup around in his large hands and shakes his head, tells me I’ll find the right person soon enough. He doesn’t know about the beard.

I open my mouth to tell him of Mr. Chicken, but I can’t. I don’t want to whine. I want to show Mr. Yamoto that I can be in control of the restaurant. And getting special attention makes me queasy. So I tell him that the new tempura wasabi mushrooms are selling really well.

“I knew it,” says Mr. Yamoto who is always trying to develop odd new menu items.

He pats my hand when I leave and tells me to keep up the good work.

When I open the door to my apartment the air smells heavy and greasy even though I just had a ham sandwich for dinner. I rub my slight chin stubble, the prickly bits that are apparent around this time in the evening. Sometimes I shave twice a day, once in the morning and once after dinner, even if I’m just going to stay home and watch television. It’s reassuring to stand in the bathroom with my electric razor and run my hand over my smooth chin, know that a moment before it had been rough.

Mr. Chicken is back at Golden Lotus the next day, staring at people with a renewed sort of meanness. After he buys his third box of chicken bits I approach his table again.

“Sir,” I say, “we value you as a customer but ask you stop staring at people.”
Mr. Chicken squints up at me. “If I want to look at other people and have them look at me, what’s wrong with that?”

“We do not tolerate hostility toward other customers in this restaurant,” I say.

Mr. Chicken harrumphs.

Ten minutes later, when Mr. Chicken is on his second apple turnover, a woman comes up to report that he’s been looking at her so intensely that she lost her appetite.

I march back to his table.

“Sir,” I say, “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“No,” he says, glaring at me.

“Sir,” I say again, “if you don’t leave we may have to resort to more drastic measures.”

“Go ahead,” he says.

We stare at each other. His eyes are hard and the color of cocoa. After a few moments I nod at him curtly.

“Very well,” I say and troop back behind the counter. Half of my employees are cowering in the break room and worrying over what he is thinking, what he might do, if he looks like the sort of guy who’d drive his car into a fast food restaurant. I tell them that they watch too much television and give myself one more day to think of something before calling Mr. Yamoto.

In the morning I’m running late and don’t shave, go through day with a bit of blonde stubble. I’m a little nervous about it, but the beard is pretty much invisible even to me, the roughness only apparent when I touch my face. During my lunch break I decide to start staring at Mr. Chicken. He wants people to look at him so I do, sit at a table across from his and fold my hands and focus my gaze on his flushed face. He glances at me and then looks away, stares at
others who are more willing to become uncomfortable. I rub my stubble as I stare and for once it feels kind of neat, rough and scratchy, mirrors my mood.

The next day I hit the snooze button three too many times, can’t do anything but throw on clothes and run out the door, so the stubble stays. It itches a little and is visible if someone is standing really close to me. Mr. Chicken doesn’t look at me but seems angrier than usual. I swear he’s the reason why five customers get out of line and go to the restaurant next door. While I watch them walk out without buying anything, I decide to grow out my beard. I will make Mr. Chicken stare at me so he won’t look at anyone else. I’ll shock him, scare him, show him I don’t look like everybody else, either, but that doesn’t mean I go around and make little kids cry.

This plan seems perfectly brilliant for four hours until I leave work and am standing in line at the grocery and realize that the rest of the world will see my beard, too. I glance from side to side to see who is watching, but the cashier doesn’t even give me a second glance.

I have been shaving every day since I was fourteen years old, since the beard started growing and my mother found me in the bathroom rubbing my chin. She screamed and dragged my father in. He showed me how to use an electric razor. My mother bought me one of my own the next day.

“You’re already shaving your legs,” she sighed. “We’ll try not to think of this as being that different.”

Mom was always the optimist.

I had friends in high school but never dated. Easier that way. I never wanted anyone looking at me, knew the girls who didn’t shave their legs and arms were teased something awful.
They didn’t care, but I did, fretted constantly about what people would say if they knew I had a beard. When you look like everyone else, you don’t really think about how you can stand in a group of people and have no one pay much attention to you. Maybe some days you want to dye your hair pink or wear weird clothing but it’s easy to take off, easy to fit in again when you want to. When you need to. It’s when you don’t look like everyone else that you realize how important it is.

By day four I’m getting used to not shaving even though the beard still isn’t that apparent. Every time I reach for my razor I bite my lip, tell myself just one day longer. I’ve always had a certain pride in being able to conceal my beard, in knowing that nobody’s the wiser unless I go out of my way to tell them about it. But it’s rarely good when I do. I repeat to myself that maybe my stylist is right and I just need to get used to it.

Mr. Chicken is still averting his gaze from me and making customers uncomfortable. I worry that if my plan doesn’t work soon we’ll start losing a lot of business to the fast food restaurants on either side of us. We’re the only one with fried ice cream and fried wasabi mushrooms, but they aren’t worth braving the glare of a fat guy.

After I haven’t shaved for a week, my employees are so freaked out that they forget to be scared of Mr. Chicken. I have to call a meeting after the lunch rush and explain it, how the hair started growing when I hit puberty and I’ve just recently stopped shaving.

“I think it’s cool,” says one of my female employees.

“It’s kind of gross,” another mutters.

“I’d date a girl with a beard,” says one of the guys, but he’s the sort who always brown-noses so I don’t know if I can take him seriously.
When Mr. Chicken comes in for lunch I sit one table away and glare at him over my coffee. With the beard slight but apparent he keeps glancing at me, blinking, looking away, looking back. Other customers are looking at me, too, but I hope I’m not as off-putting as Mr. Chicken. No one seems to leave because of me.

After work I go to have a drink at the bar two blocks from my apartment. Part of me wants to try out the beard. The other part really needs a drink. I order a cosmopolitan and sit at the bar watching guys watch me. Because it’s a little dim they can’t see the beard at first. I know they’ve spied it when their eyes get wide.

The guy who sits next to me and orders a Guinness is wearing a polo shirt.

“So,” he says, “is that beard or just really good makeup?”

“It’s a beard,” I say.

“Wow,” he says and pauses. “Wow.”

This is the extent of our conversation, but to his credit he sits beside me until he’s finished his beer. We’re both watching the soccer match on the television above the bar.

“Well,” he says, “have a good night.”

“You, too,” I say. I order another cosmopolitan and glance sideways at this group of three guys sitting in a booth at the far wall, whispering and looking over at me every once in a while. I start wondering what kind of guy is going to find a beard attractive on a woman. I could either find the really open-minded ones or the weirdoes who think it would be cool to have a bunch of kids with beards.

After a couple more minutes one of the guys from the booth comes over and nods at me.

“We really like your beard,” he says. “Very well trimmed.” He’s smiling.
“Thanks,” I say and nod. I have no idea whether he’s being serious or sarcastic but I’ve always been terrible at judging such things. The guy returns to his friends and they all look over to me and one of them gives a little wave. I wave back and then watch more soccer. I don’t leave the bar until after they’ve gone. They were probably sincere but I don’t feel like taking chances.

At home I wash my face and brush my teeth and wash my face a second time to get out the toothpaste that stuck in the beard. It’s an odd sensation to be growing it out. A weight has been lifted. I don’t have to hide it anymore. A weight has been added. The way most people look at me now, I might as well have hair growing all over my body.

On my day off I go to Hairyette’s for advice on beard maintenance. It’s still a little stubby and I have a sort of lumberjack look. My stylist tells me that in another week or two it will look much better, silkier. It just takes patience.

“You may never want to be clean shaven again,” she says.

Her clients say the beard suits me, but they are the sort of people who are used to bearded women and probably like the aesthetic.

When I look in the mirror I’m still not sure. I’m getting used to it the way people get used to a new haircut. It looks really strange at first, but somehow starting the beard, having it, makes it easier to keep growing.

Mr. Chicken grimaces the next day when I sit at the table next to him. Customers are now looking at him and me. I’m stealing his limelight. This wasn’t what I’d originally intended, but perhaps if Mr. Chicken gets pissed enough, he’ll leave my restaurant alone and find someone else to bother.
Even though many of my employees say they don’t mind the beard, a week after our chat in the break room, the girl who didn’t like the beard quits.

“It isn’t about the beard,” she says, but she doesn’t look at me while she’s saying it.

I don’t work the register anymore, don’t even fill in when we’re short, just keep myself in the background except when I go on break and sit next to Mr. Chicken. Some customers smile at me. Others look horrified. Most of those are female. Women are scared of facial hair. We must bleach it or shave it or pull it out. I know that all too well.

When I go to Mr. Yamoto’s apartment for my weekly restaurant report I can feel every heartbeat in my fingertips. He opens the door and smiles then frowns then cocks his head.

“New look?” he says and steps to the side so I can walk in. I explain how I’ve always had facial hair but kept it shaved. Mr. Yamoto plops gracefully in a pea green overstuffed chair.

“You don’t think it will make the restaurant lose business?” he says. “It might prove distracting to customers.”

“Or it might bring them in,” I say with a hopeful smile even though it’s a dumb idea.

Mr. Yamoto deepens his frown.

“I’m staying in the background, really,” I say. “The employees aren’t bothered by the beard. I’ve never grown it out before. I want to try this.”

“Can’t you try it when you have a week’s vacation?” he says.


Mr. Yamoto folds his thick hands together and looks down at them for a moment.

“I’ll have to think about this,” he says. “It’s a restaurant and appearance is important.”

“Okay,” I say, “okay.”
Mr. Yamoto is a believer in consistency, you have to be if you own a restaurant, so I’m glad he’s giving me a chance. If I hadn’t been working for him for so long I know he’d make me shave it off without a second thought.

The following day, Mr. Chicken and Mr. Yamoto arrive at almost the same time. They both order a box of chicken bits and sit with two tables between them.

I go out to speak with Mr. Yamoto when I take my break.

“I haven’t been down to the restaurant for a time,” he says. “I wanted to see how things were doing.” Meaning he wanted to see how people were reacting to me.

Mr. Chicken is glaring at both of us, his angry eyes boring holes into our table. All attention in the restaurant is focused on us – the former sumo wrestler and the bearded lady – and away from him. After a few minutes Mr. Chicken stands and plods to the counter. He’s there an awfully long time. When he returns he’s carrying two trays, both towers of cardboard boxes. It’s more food than he usually eats–eight boxes of chicken bits, four fish sandwiches, three apple turnovers, three cherry turnovers, three sides of wasabi mushrooms, three cartons of spicy onion rings, six fried ice creams. Mr. Chicken unfolds a napkin with a snap of his wrist, lays it across his lap, and starts eating, really eating, cramming chicken bits and onions rings and mushrooms into his mouth with his fat hands at such a rate I wonder if he’s even chewing. Everyone is staring at him–me and Mr. Yamoto and all of the employees and all of the customers and it’s so disgusting and so fascinating no one can look away. He rips the turnovers and stuffs half in each cheek, eats the fried ice cream in three large bites, smearing food across his face. We’re all gaping, can smell the cloud of sweat and grease around his body.

I don’t know how long it takes Mr. Chicken to finish everything. Maybe two minutes, maybe five or ten. It feels like a really long and really short period of time and there is complete
silence in the restaurant. No one is placing any orders. No one else is even eating. We’re all just staring. When Mr. Chicken has finished everything and there is just a pile of boxes on his two trays, he wipes his mouth with a napkin, stands up, and promptly throws up everything on the golden tile floor.

We’re still staring.

Mr. Chicken plops back down and starts crying, his mouth gaping in soundless sobs.

Half of my employees run for gallons of ammonia and bleach and mops.

Mr. Yamoto stands up and walks around Mr. Chicken’s table, touches his shoulder, and it may be my imagination but I think Mr. Chicken leans toward him slightly. Mr. Yamoto daubs Mr. Chicken’s eyes very gently with a grease-stained paper napkin.

I finger my beard. It is starting to become silkier as it gets longer, the hairs not so short and hard. I don’t know how long I’ll keep it, probably shave it off eventually, but for now it feels kind of nice.
When Kimber starts growing a moustache, I’m not that surprised. I was twelve years old when mine started, about the same time I started having periods and getting public hair. I find her standing in the bathroom in front of the mirror running her finger over the slight dark hairs, smiling and frowning as if she’s testing out new lipstick to see how it looks on her face. She glances at me in the bathroom door and then turns back to the mirror.

‘I don’t know,’ she says.

‘It looks good on you,’ I say because when I started growing a moustache my mother gasped then cried then dragged my father away from the television. An hour later she made him teach me how to shave with a razor. I bled.

‘I don’t know,’ Kimber says again. ‘It feels kind of funny.’

‘Try it for a few days,’ I say. ‘You have to give it a chance.’

It’s not a big secret around town that she’s my daughter or that I have a beard so I’m sure half the people we know have been waiting for this to happen. Some of my customers in the salon even hint to it from time, ask how Kimber is doing, remark that she is becoming a beautiful young lady. They are asking me if I think she’ll have a beard. If I’ll make her shave. If she’ll want to.

My beard is quite soft, silky, although it grows in a little coarse after I’ve shaven clean. That’s part of the reason I don’t do it very often. I keep the beard neatly trimmed, about an inch and a half to two inches long. It’s a hassle to shave anyway. If I do it at eight in the morning I have a five o’clock shadow by the time the salon closes and have to shave again when I get home. My mother still makes a face when she sees me at Christmas and Easter and
Thanksgiving and on my birthday. Kimber and I don’t visit her much. I think the hair is a little softer than a man’s beard, or at least it was softer than Dale’s. We were married nine years and he never minded the beard, never told me to shave for any company event we attended.

‘If I can have a beard my wife might as well have one, too,’ he always said. That was one of the reasons I loved Dale. He was diplomatic. He just wasn’t cut out to be a family man.

Even though I have an electric razor I tell Kimber to try the moustache for a week.

‘I think it’s very becoming,’ I say, putting my face next to hers in the mirror. ‘Remember when you were five you wanted a beard like mommy’s?’

‘When I was five I wanted to get married to Mike Nitzel on the moon,’ she says.

‘It takes a little while to get used to,’ I say. ‘It did for me. Once you see yourself like this a few times, you may really like it. It’s just hair.’

Kimber is still squinting at herself in the mirror, biting her lip, but she shrugs acquiescence. She goes to school on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, with no comment, so I figure she’s adjusting and everything is okay.

I get the call from Kimber’s principal on Thursday afternoon, but I’m setting a permanent at the time and have to call them back. I’ve owned my own salon for fifteen years now. Hairyette’s. Three stylists work under me and we do well. The prices are reasonable, and I figure that while my beard probably helps bring new customers in, quality keeps them with us.

When I call the principal she says my daughter has to shave.

‘I want you to know that I’m not contesting your decision to have facial hair,’ she says, ‘or your daughter’s right to have facial hair once she is older, but Kimber’s moustache is distracting to other students. I’m also concerned about negative effects this might have on her social life.’
‘But don’t other students have moustaches?’ I say. ‘They’re all hitting puberty about this time.’

‘Boys tend to enter puberty later than girls,’ says the principal. ‘I don’t think many of them are shaving yet.’

‘You wouldn’t make a boy shave his moustache,’ I say.

‘Think of it as a dress code,’ says the principal. ‘There are certain things we do not allow students to wear, halter tops for instance, that would prove distracting. Kimber has already been subjected to teasing. Children can be cruel.’

As if I don’t damn well know that.

‘You’re the principal,’ I say. ‘You’re supposed to keep the jerks under control.’

‘We do what we can, but we can’t stop everything,’ says the principal.

‘You better try because my daughter is not shaving.’ I hang up the phone before she can say anything else.

I leave work early and get home around four, find Kimber in the living room without the television on. The skin around her eyes is red and puffy.

‘I want a razor,’ she says. ‘I want to shave. The boys brought a bowl of dry dog food to lunch today. They put it in front of me at the table and tried to shove my face into it. They’re calling me wolf woman and whistling at me and asking if my dad was Bigfoot.’

She cries and I hug her. She keeps crying. I tell her that everything is going to be okay, that we’re going to find out the names of the boys and contact the police, contact their parents, make sure there are repercussions.

‘I just want to shave,’ she says into my sweater.
I give her a bowl of ice cream and call Dale. We still have a good relationship, get coffee every other Tuesday when he’s in town, talk about Kimber and how she’s doing in school. Dale has Kimber every other weekend and on Wednesday nights if he has time. He’s a salesman, always going to conventions. When we got married I don’t think he realized how involved he’d get with his career, but Dale is a good man, supported me in opening my own business, pays his child support on time, and has started a college savings account for Kimber. We’re friends but learned a lot time ago that we can’t live together.

I explain the situation to Dale and he is quiet for a moment. From time to time we discussed what we might do if this happened, but never decided on any hard and fast plans, figured we’d deal with issues as they came.

‘We need to consider putting her in a private school,’ I say, ‘somewhere where they control the hooligans and Kimber can have a moustache and a healthy self-image.’

‘You could let her shave,’ says Dale.

‘Or we could think about home schooling,’ I say, ‘get her a good tutor.’

‘Doesn’t she want to shave?’ says Dale.

‘That’s just peer pressure,’ I say, ‘she’d be fine with her moustache if all those little assholes weren’t shoving dog food in her face.’

‘Taking her out of school seems awfully drastic though,’ says Dale, ‘all her friends are there. Buy the kid a razor. Or let her use yours.’

‘I don’t even know if it works anymore,’ I say, ‘I haven’t used it in months.’

This is a black lie of course, I shaved two months ago, but that’s beside the point.

‘Kimber will never have pride in her beard if she doesn’t start now,’ I say. ‘She’ll spend her whole life shaving and trying to deny it.’
Dale says, ‘She’s eleven for pete’s sake. She wants to fit in and be a normal kid.’

‘She is a normal kid,’ I say

‘She sure as hell doesn’t feel like it,’ says Dale.

‘I need some time to think,’ I say, ‘we’ll talk more later.’ I hang up. Damn. Dale was always supportive of my beard, I figured he’d support Kimber’s too. I don’t want her to shave, but I feel bad stopping her from shaving. I want her to want the moustache herself. It’s too easy to remember all the names kids in school called me when I tried not shaving for a day or two. Dog face. Wolf woman. For years I hated myself for needing to shave my face. I started going out with Dale during our sophomore year in high school. He was the one who encouraged me to grow a beard along with him when we started college. That’s why I clung to him, why my mother hated him. He supported me in opening my own salon because I couldn’t get a job at any established business unless I had electrolysis. I wanted to keep my beard by then. It was a matter of hard-won pride.

I let Kimber stay home from school on Friday because I know she’s had a traumatic week and I want her to have time to think about her moustache. I leave out pictures of Dale and me when we were first married, both young and happy and bearded at Niagara Falls, Myrtle Beach, and the St. Louis Arch.

It’s Dale’s turn to have Kimber over the weekend, and by the time I get home from Hairyette’s she’s packed and ready to go. I can’t tell if she’s looked at the pictures on the kitchen table, but I flip through them myself after Dale comes to get her. Good years. Lean years. Dale was studying business and I was studying cosmetology. We had Vietnam protest signs in the window of our apartment and ate a lot of canned soup. I was a bra burner with a beard and it felt good.
I spend the weekend making calls about possible home schooling tutors and compose little speeches about the benefits of beardedness to recite to my daughter. A beard keeps your face warmer in the winter, keeps the mosquitoes off in the summer. The hair is nice and silky and you can dye it or braid it or trim and shape it. From a distance people may mistake you for a guy, but that can be helpful when walking alone at night. You can be tough with a beard, or you can be soft, feminine. It’s a sort of masculinity you can take off and put on again. More women should be so lucky.

On Sunday night Dale and Kimber appear on my doorstep. She is clean-shaven. Dale bought her an electric razor. He puts a hand on her shoulder and smiles as if nothing is wrong.

‘I taught my little girl how to shave,’ he says.

‘It was kind of fun,’ says Kimber. ‘My upper lip feels nice and smooth now.’

I haul both of them inside, send Kimber to the living room to watch television, drag Dale into the bedroom we used to share, and slam the door.

‘Why the hell didn’t you ask me before buying her a razor?’

‘I asked you and you said no,’ says Dale, sitting on the bed. ‘Kimber said yes. The goddamned principal said yes.’

‘That doesn’t mean anything,’ I say, ‘she’s just a kid and she’s going through a lot of changes with puberty and everything. Facial hair is just another change. You have to give her more time to adjust.’

‘She’s going to have the rest of her life to adjust,’ says Dale. ‘What do you want, some sort of mother-daughter freak show?’

This is when I smack him across the face. I’ve never hit Dale before. My hand stings and I feel bad right away. Dale holds a tight hand to his cheek like I’ve cut him. When he
moves his fingers I can see a red mark. Dale stands up, walks silently to the door, turns to face me.

He says quietly, ‘She has a right to look like a regular eleven-year-old girl just like you have the right to have pride in your beard.’

After Dale leaves I ruffle through Kimber’s duffle bag and find the razor, secure it in a cupboard in my bedroom.

‘If I can’t shave I’m not going to school,’ Kimber says before she goes to bed.

‘One week,’ I say, ‘just try it for one week and then I’ll let you shave. I promise.’

‘I already tried it for a week and they made me eat dog food,’ she says.

We argue back and forth for a few more minutes but in the end I resort to bribery, tell her I’ll buy the in-line skates she’s been wanting. It’s six months until her birthday, longer until Christmas, and Kimber’s always been the impatient sort. She bites her lip but nods at my offer, the slow nod of someone who knows she has been purchased. I kiss her forehead and tell myself it’s for her own good.

Monday she doesn’t look too different. Tuesday it’s okay, a little dark above her lip. By Wednesday the moustache is definitely showing. All day at work I expect a call from the principal saying Kimber can’t come back until she shaves. I’ve read the school dress code twice and facial hair is fine as long as it is properly trimmed. I’m ready to make a stink and am a little disappointed when nothing happens.

But I shouldn’t say nothing happens because by Wednesday, Kimber, the principal, and the dog food incident have all but made the local paper. My clients at Hairyette’s keep offering cheerful editorials as I’m trimming their hair or setting it in curlers.

‘A good thing you’re doing, standing behind your daughter like that.’
‘Kids these days, they’re afraid to be different. Your daughter’s a special one.’

‘That principal should be calling the parents of those boys, not you.’

I can also tell who doesn’t agree with me. When those customers look in the mirror it’s not at their reflection. Their gaze falls just above, at my beard.

We have six appointment cancellations over the three days, more than usual, but I’m not going to guess at the motivations.

Kimber is quiet at dinner. When I ask how school is going, she shrugs. I ask if the boys are still bothering her. Shrug. I ask if the moustache is bothering her. Shrug. I ask if she is thinking she might keep it.

‘Sometimes it’s itchy and I feel like there’s a big caterpillar on my lip,’ she says. ‘But other times it feels kind of neat to run my fingers over in class or twist the ends. Daddy always did that.’

A glimmer of hope. Well worth whatever the skates will cost me.

Thursday I get the call. Kimber and two other girls tackled a boy in the lunchroom. The two girls crammed dog food into his mouth while Kimber pulled a small electric shaver out of her jeans pocket and took off a hunk of his hair.

Kimber, her two cohorts, and the boy are in the principal’s office when I arrive. The boy looks like he has a reverse Mohawk. One strip of hair down the middle of his head is shorn clear off. I bite my lip so I don’t smile. If only I’d had a couple of girls to stand behind me in high school... Girls in twos and threes and fours have more power that adults give them credit for. The principal has already lectured all four students. The girls will have an hour-long detention after school next week. It sounds like a penalty light enough to have made the head-shaving worth it. I think the principal is a bit sympathetic since she deals with the antics of eleven-year-
old boys all day long. On the way home I tell Kimber how happy I am that she has friends who support her and her moustache.

‘They agreed to help me beat up that jerk after I said I’d give them a few moustache hairs when it grew back,” says Kimber. “I told them I’m probably the only bearded kid they’d ever know. A couple other girls said they’d pay me a dime a hair.’

I grimace and picture little girls with Kimber’s moustache hairs in lockets as lucky charms. My child should not become a fad. ‘You shouldn’t give them moustache hairs,’ I say, ‘let alone sell them. That’s silly.’

‘Why not?’ she says. ‘They helped me beat up that kid. It doesn’t really hurt when I pull the hairs out.’

‘We don’t do that sort of thing,’ I say.

I glance at my daughter in the rearview mirror, smoothing her moustache hairs, smiling coyly. ‘They’re my hairs,’ she says, ‘I can do what I want with them.’

‘We shouldn’t use our beards in order to get attention,’ I say. ‘It’s not right.’

Kimber pinches her fingers together just under her nose, gives a little tug, studies the tiny hair caught between forefinger and thumb. ‘As big as an eyelash,’ she says. ‘But they grow really quickly.’

‘It’s not right,’ I repeat, but Kimber is smoothing her fingers over her top lip and I don’t think she hears me.