
**YOU SEE
RIGHT
THROUGH
ME**

SARAH MIA
DURAN



HUMAN ANIMALS

LAUREN KEELEY

My body is cast like a George Segal sculpture. The orthotist's wet hands land on the jarringly bony protrusion of my hip. The casting material, three to four inches wide, is wrapped up into cylinders like tape, then unraveled and soaked in the murky water bucket. He places the sopping pinkish gauze onto the hipbone, holding it in place while wrapping the rest around my torso, the strip ending just short of the steep curve between my nascent hips and waist. My only job is to stay still and not take any deep breaths; I am mummified up to my sternum. It smells like latex and chalk, feels like a wet washcloth soaked in hot water and rested on the eyelids to ease a headache, all of the heat escaping in a matter of fifteen seconds. It is now cold and damp, but hardening.

Standing there at Shriner's Hospital for Children in West Philadelphia at age ten, I imagine what it would feel like to be completely set in cast, and what pose I would assume. Simply standing straight, I think. Seal up the potential energy of motion and wait for a crack in the mold. I look down and notice the slight bulge created by one of my left ribs, a result of my overgrown ribcage. It doesn't bother me at this moment; the casting holds everything tight and vertical, two things I realize I will never be. I stand, eyes forward, wait a few minutes. It dries like the bright white stucco on my neighbor's house and creates a sprinkled mess around my feet. He slices the casting with a swift vertical motion and my body cascades out of the stillness, no longer stable.

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The summer after my junior year of college, I watch my grandfather use a walker that, for all of its brakes and safety features, rattles like a tin of loose screws. DME, durable medical equipment. The contraption is aluminum and four-legged; that makes six legs in total while in use. Its wheels are designed for any floor surface but not the sharp corners of a family home. Who decided to build this house with such a narrow doorframe to the bathroom? And whose grand idea was a staircase? The entire family is now aware of the glaring lack of foresight in construction. Who plans for getting old? My mom will plan for it, as will her two sisters and her brother.

He approaches the walker as an impediment rather than an assistive device, picking it up off the ground as if to move it out of his way rather than rolling it along. With each step the four legs hit the ground hard. The carpet absorbs the collision in a deep thump, but the linoleum in the kitchen echoes with the skidding wheels. There is no turning mobility for risk of compromising balance, so he comes up against the walls and corners fiercely, banging into table edges and dinging the paint on the wall. This sound is the clearest to me: it is desperate and fast. Slow methodical movements are dangerous in the same way that an inexperienced gymnast never lingers on the balance beam, but instead runs ahead swiftly, eyes on the other end, trusting in the familiar movements of her feet when they are on solid ground. I catch my breath and spring up from the couch every time, expecting something to catch hold of his loose clothing, or maybe nothing at all...

The four legs alternate with the clunk of his drop foot – the ankle brace corrects its laxity but impresses deep cuts into his already bruised skin. He looks like a puppet whose strings have been cut, the entire body too weak to resist the pull of gravity. We are destined to the ground, his wilting, heavy frame suggests. I