Skinny

One hundred and ninety-seven pounds was what the scale read. Minus a few pounds for waist-length black hair and another few for work clothes, which consisted of a knee-length skirt, matching top and jacket, and panty hose, no shoes. At best that left Danielle five pounds lighter – 192. According to the physician, she was supposed to be 180 pounds, max.

Dan scrunched her shoulders as she stepped off the scale and let her jacket fall off of her. She knew that it was best to weigh herself in the morning, right before her shower, naked. But that meant also coming in contact of the full-length mirror on the back of her bathroom door. It wasn’t that she couldn’t stand her image or hated her weight (both of which were true to an extent) but that she couldn’t handle them both at the same time.

The roundness of her belly under her small breasts got to her the most. Especially when she was sitting in front of the television, watching models walk down the runway, she could feel her stomach growing, see it protruding, and (if she laughed) feel it jiggle. She wished she could cut the fat off with a carving knife in one big slice, although the smell of blood made her nauseous.
She walked into her adjoining bedroom where she tossed her jacket onto her blue quilted bedspread. Her grandmother had given it to her when she believed she was quickly dying. But Dan’s grandmother was still alive today. I should call her, Dan thought. It’s been awhile.

She turned on the radio and unzipped her skirt. Friday night was approaching quickly, although her only plans were to wear her loosest sweatpants and tank top (no bra) and curl up in the armchair in her room with a book. Her roommate would be gone all night, out at the bars with friends from work, not even bothering to see if Dan wanted to come.

When Dan and Veronica had started living together the fall before, Veronica had always asked if Dan had wanted to join the crowd. The first few times she went and mainly had fun but felt more like a tag-along younger sister than part of the group. She stopped saying yes and slowly over the next couple of months Veronica stopped asking altogether.

Dan never actually saw Veronica come home drunk or with a guy. She always fell asleep in the middle of paragraphs, of sentences, her table lamp still glowing gently and her wire-rimmed glasses still perched on her nose.

Sometimes she woke in the middle of the night to get a drink or a snack to find her
book bent and sprawled on the floor, her place lost. Sometimes she woke and the light would be off, her glasses folded carefully and sitting on her small table by the armchair. Her book would be turned upside down, the spine bent and opened to the page she had been reading when she fell asleep. One time she even found a sticky-note in her book that read, "I think you’re on this page, but I’m not sure." The handwriting wasn’t Veronica’s and when questioned, she didn’t know whose it was but guessed it was the guy – Mike or Marc or something – who had followed her home the night before.

“Don’t let your ‘guests’ come into my room when I’m sleeping; it’s creepy.” Although Veronica promised to keep an eye on the guys she brought home, Dan started locking her bedroom door before picking up her book.

Dan laughed at herself as she tried to pull her shirt over her head with her glasses still on. As she struggled to take off her glasses with her arm length shortened by the tangle of her shirt, the phone rang. She gave up and pulled the shirt over her head in a hurry, letting her glasses be flung to the floor.

“Hello?” She crossed her arms over her small chest incase it was a man calling. Even though whoever was on the other end
couldn’t see her, Dan sometimes felt that her privacy was being invaded.

“Hey. It’s me.” Veronica.

“What’s going on?”

“The girls and I are going out for drinks to celebrate – well, life. Wanna come?”

Dan was too shocked to say anything. It had been at least two months since the last time Veronica had even asked her to go out on a Friday night. It took Dan a little bit to process the thought.

“Yeah, that would be great. Where do you want me to meet you?”

“Martin’s at 9:45. Wear something sexy – it’s lady’s night.” Dial tone.

Something sexy. Dan wasn’t sure if she had anything sexy in her closet. Mainly her wardrobe consisted of work clothes – nice but nothing she would wear to a bar – and tie-dye t-shirts she usually wore with baggy jeans. There were black pants she could wear with a white tank, though it started clinging to body parts she didn’t want the public noticing.

It wasn’t difficult to hide the fat, except in her face and thighs. As a result, she usually ended up wearing nothing that wouldn’t reach at least her knees and a shirt with a low neckline to make her neck stretch and her face appear longer and less round.

She pulled the black pants over her nylons, too lazy to correct the mistake once she noticed it. She was well aware that she
didn’t need to leave for at least another hour; she wanted to give herself plenty of time so she could change her outfit several times.

The last time such an event happened was the night of her freshman Homecoming Dance (“Hog Heaven” was the theme since the mascot was the hogs. Inside the gym was decorated with pink pigs wearing white-feathered wings, flying through a baby blue sky with cotton clouds). The dress she picked out two weeks in advance suddenly wasn’t good enough an hour and a half before her date, Kyle, was due to arrive. She got out every dress she owned, trying each one on frantically and then called her girlfriends to bring over all of their extra dresses (everyone was meeting at her house anyway before going out to dinner as a group and then onto the dance).

But none of her friends’ dresses fit and so Dan ended up wearing what she started out in – a teal color dress with silver sparkles on the straps and empire waist. Everyone said she looked great, especially with her hair curled and dotted with tiny teal flowers. When Kyle didn’t arrive and the group absolutely could not wait any longer before missing the reservation at the restaurant, they convinced Dan to go anyway, promising they wouldn’t exclude her from the group.

She went and was content with the situation until she arrived at the dance and
saw Kyle getting his picture taken with Kristi, Dan’s stick-thin next door neighbor. Dan quickly separated from her group of friends (and since no one came looking for her later, she assumed no one noticed or cared) and went outside. She only wanted some fresh air, some room and privacy to cry, but instead was met with a cloud of cigarette smoke coming from a group of seniors. That night Dan had her first, second, and third cigarette before she got sick in the backseat on the car ride home.

She pulled the tight white tank, made of cotton and spandex, over her head and sucked in her stomach. She didn’t know why she was so nervous. Picking her glasses from the floor, she went to the bathroom to check her reflection in the full-length mirror. “One ninety-seven,” it taunted her. “I’m only 192,” she told the mirror. It shut up.

Letting her stomach out, Dan looked at her sideways reflection. She would wear clunky black shoes, she decided, and the pants were a good choice. Not so tight, but not too loose. She walked back to her bedroom and, after pulling on her shoes, slumped into her armchair and picked up her book of essays. *I can get a few essays in before I have to leave*, she thought, right before the phone rang again.

“Hello?”
Damn! Sorry, Dan. Me again. I dialed the wrong number. I don’t know what’s wrong with me tonight.”

“It’s okay. Martin’s at a quarter ‘til ten, right?”

“Right. See you then.”

“Bye.”

Dan turned the cordless phone off, giving it a questioning look. That was a bit odd. She shrugged and returned to her book.

Less than an hour later, Dan stepped out of her ’92 navy Honda Civic, right into a puddle of old rainwater and oil. “Shit.” Her left foot was soaked, as well as the bottom of her pant leg. She looked at the puddle, which was slowly swirling around from being disturbed by her now-wet foot. “It’s a bad omen,” the reflection said. “Turn back now.”

“Shush. It’s my first night out in months. So what if I have a slip up now and then?”

“Well, at least put your glasses on straight and brush your hair.”

The reflection disappeared as Dan stamped her right foot down in the puddle. Drops of water flung up and hit above her knee. “That ought to shut you up.” She looked up and noticed a few people on the sidewalk across the street were looking at her, shocked. Pushing up her glasses, she chose to ignore them and walked a block down the busy strip of bars, restaurants, and
shops until she came upon Martin’s. The line was short and the entrance fee was minimal and Dan saw this as a good sign.

Stepping through the entranceway from the tiny vestibule to the bar, Dan was not awed at the sight before her. The bars she had been to before were pretty much like this one. There was a dance floor to her right, filled with people jumping up and down, swaying back and forth. In front of the dance floor, in the back of the bar, was the stage, where the band was playing. Directly in front of her were high tables and stools for people to sit, stand, talk, and drink. To her left was the bar, as crowded as the dance floor.

Dan waded through the congestion of bodies towards the tables, where she spotted Veronica. She was still about ten feet away from the table when the band ended their set and the room quieted down, although the sound of chattering people still vibrated off the walls. The dance floor started to empty as people went to the bar and tables.

“I dialed the wrong number.”

Dan stopped. Veronica was shouting to her friends at the table, unaware that the music had stopped and she didn’t need to shout as loudly as before.

“I didn’t realize until I had already asked her to come.” Veronica looked upset.
“But she isn’t coming – is she?” a friend of Veronica’s asked, her drink half-way to her mouth.

Veronica’s chin dropped to her chest. Shaking her head, she looked back up at her friend. “She accepted the offer.”

“God, I don’t want to have to be nice to her,” complained a second friend. “I’ve had a stressful week and I just want to unwind.”

“Nobody’s asking you to be nice to her,” Veronica said. “Just do what we used to do – ignore her a little and she’ll take the hint she’s unwanted.”

Veronica kept talking, but Dan had heard enough. Before the table full of girls could spot her, she turned and quickly walked out of the bar and back to her car. Her hands were shaking as she tried to unlock the driver’s door.

“I told you it was a bad omen.”

Once in the car she didn’t start it right away. She placed her hands on the steering wheel and took a few deep breaths. “Don’t cry, Danielle. Don’t cry,” she whispered out loud. “They could have been talking about someone else.”

“They weren’t talking about someone else.”

Dan glared at her rear-view mirror. “Nobody asked you.”

“Can you blame them? I mean, look at you. Your hair is split-end city.”

“Shut up,” hissed Dan.
“Your glasses are always sliding down to the end of your nose.”

“Shut up,” she said through clenched teeth.

“And you must be twenty pounds overweight.”

“I SAID SHUT UP!” Dan thrust her fist into the mirror, cracking it. She was breathing too hard to notice the blood trickling down her clenched hand.

“Now look what you’ve done,” seven Dans scolded her.

With an angry cry, Dan grabbed the mirror with both hands and tore it from its place, opened her door, and threw it in the puddle. She started the car and drove off in a fit of rage.

Back home, she went straight to the bathroom and, picking up the scale, started smashing the full-length mirror. Glass showered her and collected at her feet. “No one cares what you have to say!” she shouted at the remaining pieces of the mirror. “No one notices when you’re sick or missing! They don’t bother to call you to tell you they aren’t taking you to the dance! They will taunt and tease and not think twice about what you’re feeling inside because they are skinny and have never felt that ache – that burn – before!”

Dan stopped, panting as she looked over what she had done. Only the corners of the mirror were left; everything else was in
shards on the floor. She looked at the scale in her hands. Undamaged. After throwing it down, shattering the pieces even more, she stormed to the kitchen and back, carrying a large garbage bag and broom. She swept the mirror and scale into the bag, tied it shut, and took it out to the dumpster.

Once she was in her sweatpants and tank top (no bra) and sitting in the armchair, Dan felt calmer. She had bandaged her hand and cleaned the small cuts on her arm from the flying shards. She fell asleep in the armchair, wire-rimmed glasses still on, her book on the floor and her place lost. The next morning at breakfast when Veronica casually asked what had happened to her last night, Dan didn’t flinch when she said she simply forgot where they were supposed to meet and decided to stay home instead.

-Liz Sidley