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Dear Curtis Sittenfeld,

Although you don't know me, I feel as though I know you very well, as though I've been with you for four of the most formative years of your life. Of course, I haven't spent those years with you; I spent them with Lee Fiora, the scholarship student navigating her high school career at a prestigious New England boarding school in your coming-of-age odyssey, Prep.

While reading about Lee, I saw that her antisocial and self-conscious behaviors were a reflection of my own actions in certain settings. Although I consider myself a sociable person, all of my interactions are usually calculated and thoroughly planned; I fear embarrassing myself more than anything in the world. Lee also engages in this sort of behavior, and it makes her miserable; she shuns social opportunities, fixates on negative interactions, and mostly refuses to do what she wants for fear of looking bad. Although my anxiety isn't as totally pervasive, I've also missed opportunities I probably would have enjoyed if I'd only been confident enough to take advantage; I didn't tell a boy I was interested, I didn't attend a party because I was worried I wouldn't know anyone, I didn't agree to go to a sleepover because I felt that my invitation had been last-minute and they didn't really want me to go. At the time, each action seemed like a sane, safe alternative to taking a risk.

When I wasn't fearing for my own social standing, however, and instead totally engrossed in the Roman epics Lee weaves from the mundane of her life, I could see that her actions were impacting her more negatively than positively. I thought, *If she only spoke up, even if no one had laughed, they'd have appreciated her efforts to participate in the discussion.* When I stopped reading, I found that I was reminded of Lee's failures by observing my own.

Lee blames her social awkwardness on a host of issues, one of which is her appearance. This is an issue that resounded with me; while Lee considers her problem that she is an average-looking girl, mine is that sometimes, I *can't* fit in. I have Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis, an autoimmune disease of the joints. Because of joint damage, I can't straighten my arms fully, and occasionally, due to fluctuations in my medicinal regimen, my arthritis flares up again, resulting in unsightly swelling and restriction of movement.

In my freshman year of high school, the tumultuous year where fresh-faced, teens try to fit in among the older students and carve out a niche for themselves, the ankle and knee of my leg swelled and became excruciatingly painful. Eventually, I couldn't put pressure on that leg and had to use my school's elevator when travelling between classes on different floors.

While the physical impairments themselves should have been what I was focused on, I, like Lee, placed so much emphasis on what others thought of me that improving my own health was barely a concern. I tried to minimize my limp by walking on my leg normally, to the point where I exacerbated the damage.

Around this time, as boys became the largest deciding factor in a girl's popularity, I found myself exposed to some of their unexpectedly ugly jokes. Handsome, athletic, popular boys, boys who I wanted desperately to like me, began calling me the Hunchback of Notre Dame. They imitated my limp. They hunched over, gnarled their hands, and stumbled bow-legged across the floor, calling, "Look, I'm Rachel at twenty!"

I was crushed. When it became clear I was uncomfortable, one of the boys wrapped his arms around me and said, "You know we're just messing with you, right?"

And his arm was around me, so I laughed.

When I got home, I contorted myself in the mirror until I looked like the creature they'd predicted I would become. I saw myself as unattractive, a deviant from an ideal I'd aspired to since birth, the owner of a mutation which could be forced by my will into something appealing. In reality, the appealing side of myself was there from the beginning; the monster was an image I formed for myself from the words of others, a hard, full-body cast I stuffed my swollen joints into every morning.

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Then I read Prep, and I thought back to this moment, to my endless contortionist act, always trying to fit into a mold that was assigned to me, always placing everyone above myself. One of the most powerful parts for me is when Lee is in bed with Cross Sugarman, the boy she has had a crush on forever, and makes a joke about transvestites she would have never made had it not been to impress him. Afterwards, she ruminates, "What I want from the guy is worth more than everything else I want or believe. It must be, right? "

I had to reread the passage, just to fully comprehend that you had put words to a feeling I had never been able to explain before. In this way, you gave me a voice before I learned to use my own.

I can not thank you enough for bringing this voice to teenage girls who are always bending, always forcing themselves to slip on corsets of expectations and swallow their protests, no matter how much they burn. Thanks to your book, I have stopped pushing myself to walk, and instead learned how to limp.

Sincerely,
Rachel Horowitz-Benoit