

Mary Clark

Developed

Simone's breasts made her mother happy. Crouched down in the department store, detangling the confusion of straps and tiny plastic hangers, paging through the no-nonsense racks for a 28C, at last she found one, freed it, and waved it in the air. That bra wasn't pretty. It looked industrial even though it had lace sewn onto the cups, its structure camouflaged, like those huts in desert wars with a beige mesh thrown on top. And it *was* beige. Just like her mother's and her grandmother's bras. The same beige, or rather *nude*, as Simone's mother had corrected, squeezed between metal carousels and trees, holding the specimen threaded into its vise—part flesh, part mangled bird—a plucked hen pushed against her daughter's orange sweater. Simone pleaded for the pretty bras in raspberry and grape over by the register, but those colors only came with two hooks in the back, and her mother said that Simone needed more support.

"No, I don't," Simone said. "They're fine."

"For now, yes." Her mother lightly raised one of Simone's breasts with the back of her hand. "But soon they will not be."

In the checkout line, her mother held out the nude composite on its miniature hanger. Fastened in the back, with the straps slotted into clamps, it was fused to its rig.

"Simone. Take it!"

She hooked it on her pinkie to inspect. In the center, where the cleavage goes, a bow, stitched down at its knot, was in on the dupe. Simone wasn't falling for it. No way a thin satin ribbon could turn all that function into something kittenish. She let her arms fall and swayed a little to take in the feel of her steadfast plumpness against wool, their last days of freedom before she'd get trussed every day, like that hen.

"Wake up." Her mother took the bra from her and put it on the counter.

The bra lady, a bosomed woman herself, entered the tag into the register, every three punches sounding the three syllables: *de-vel-oped*. That was the word she'd said in the fitting room when Simone stood at the mirror and saw her own body in some future stall with upholstered seating, a bra lady herself with a plastic measuring-tape stethoscope, leaning over, lassoing tender flesh, arranging and tugging, shifting forward and back, held barely upright by sturdy black shoes. After her mother proffered her credit card, the bra lady awarded Simone her prize by the handles of a department store bag, welcoming one more into the fold in a way that said *resignation will come as a comfort*.

It was the year when fathers were voting for Nixon, when uncles were in Vietnam, and full-figured teenagers wore the Playtex cross-your-heart. The nightly divide at dinner was loud. Simone's father had to change his vote, or else. There was a war in the world and a war at home and a war in Simone's very body. She stuffed the bra, bag and all, in the back of her underwear drawer. And so, the next morning, when she came in from the bathroom, she was surprised to see it again, pulled out from behind panties and slips, unwrapped and splayed on the bed.

"I'm not wearing that," Simone said. "You told me I don't have to yet. That I can wait."

"Get dressed," her mother said, floating the four-hooker at her daughter. Simone put it on, but she didn't bend forward to seat her breasts, one at a time, like the bra lady told her to. She pulled it around her middle, fastened it in front, steered the hooks to the back, put her arms through the straps, and glared at her mother.

"You look beautiful." Her mother kissed her on the head and left the room.

It was weird to not want what other girls wanted. Simone didn't get sympathy from her classmates who were wadding up toilet paper in the school bathroom and shoving it down their shirts. "Does this look smooth?" they asked each other, arching their backs and turning in the mirror.

"You should enjoy the time you have," Simone told them.

"Stop complaining, Simone. You're like a rich person whining about the price of things to the poor."

"Yeah, Simone. You don't know what it's like."

At least she was honest. She wasn't going around fixing slippage with the sides of her crossed arms, acting like she wasn't doing that. The bra lady was right. She was *developed*. It was the word she used to understand herself then, a girl with a body ahead of other girls'.

There's a funny story Simone's mother likes to tell. After her brother is born, Simone is a toddler sitting in the bathtub with her plastic baby doll, pulling on her little three-year-old nipples. "What are you doing," her mother asks her, and in the story, still inside her play fantasy, Simone looks up to tell her mother that she's feeding her baby, and says, "But if these things don't grow, he's gonna starve!" Had she done it to herself, pulling them like that? Was that why Simone's breasts grew before any of the girls' in her class, and any of the girls' in the class ahead of her and in the class ahead of that?

It took only a year after that first bra for Simone to know her power. Everywhere she went, she was the most sought-after girl: in school, in church, in the drugstore sampling perfume. Boys came up to talk to her, to stare at her. This is what life will be, she thought. After school on the tarmac, pushed against the brick, she let a boy kiss her and cup her camouflaged huts. Flattened like that, straight on, her body was an infinite flowing hourglass with most of her sand on the top, full of what seemed all the time in the world. But that turned out not to be true.

Simone stayed in first place the next year, but second and third were good enough for boys. Boys were sloppy. They didn't calibrate with accuracy, and they stayed obvious, even after they finessed their move to a sideways bump on her way to the cafeteria, blaming the crowded stairwell.

Lisa, a girl happily in contention, had a word for it. "I enjoy a cop-a-feel."

Simone chewed her sandwich, replaying the jostle on the way to lunch. "Remember when they used to accidentally trip and grab your tits?" she asked Lisa, the conversation forever bound to the taste of cream cheese and olive.

"Yes. I hated that."

Lisa always got hot lunch. Hot food in the afternoon made Simone sleepy. That day it was meatloaf, but it didn't matter. It all smelled the same, no matter what they were serving: a savory stew Simone thought of as *cafeteria*. "But the brush-by? You don't hate?"

"Right. It's what the shy ones do." Lisa, a 28B, who made up for her cup size with her long blond hair, was looking down, working a scab on one of her knobby knees. "It's not mean," she said. "Just curious."

"You like curious?"

"I love it." Lisa picked up her fork and stabbed off a piece of meatloaf. "Don't you?"

"No," Simone said at first and then said, "Wait. Maybe." How would she know? She didn't have the leisure to gradually discover what she liked.

Except when it came to bras. The day after Lisa got hers, she showed it off to the group in the bathroom. It was purple with red lace. "It's Chantilly," she said about the swirling pattern. "And this is my favorite part," she said about the row of filigreed puffs extending above each cup, offering a glimpse of the supple skin underneath.

The whole thing was Simone's favorite part. "It's going to show through your clothes when you wear white," she said.

"Good idea," Lisa said, and after that she wore white or yellow every day. Not only did Lisa's bra show through, but, depending on the cut of her shirt, it *showed*, usually exposing just the straps, but sometimes, parts of the cup, and even the whole thing.

"That child needs help," Simone heard her mother say about Lisa wearing her father's tank top, her go-to outfit when kids ran base lines in the street. It covered okay, standing, but when she doubled over to catch her breath, the neckline gaped open. "Lisa! You're flashing the whole neighborhood," Simone's mother called out, making everyone laugh, but Lisa didn't straighten up. She waited for the next boy to throw, then dashed to safety faster than anyone.

Simone got used to the bright shadow beneath Lisa's shirt but couldn't ignore the lacy rim that peeked out of her V-neck, by mistake, it seemed. "Your bra's showing," she whispered.

"I know. I'm doing a look." Lisa turned to aim all that beauty into view. "It's sexy."

That shook Simone, because up until then, *sexy* didn't go with *pretty*.

It was Lisa who'd told her about sex, about how intercourse worked, the summer before. "You made that up," Simone had said, crossing back to her side of the street. It was easy to not believe Lisa. She lied a lot.

"It's true," Lisa called over. She was standing in her father's spot, where no one from that block parked after four o'clock. "And you have to do it if you want to have babies."

"I want to have babies," Simone yelled back, then waited for a car to go by. "But I'm not doing that." She went into her house and up to her room, thinking there had to be another way.

The cafeteria was loud. Simone could hear the conversation at her table, but all around her the massive room held a general thrum inside its gray cinderblock walls. "I wouldn't advise the sexy look for you," Lisa told Simone when she pulled down her neckline to show her own lace. "That granny bra's not cutting it."

Why did she keep getting stuck with Lisa? They weren't the same. It was hard to be around somebody like herself who was different from herself. When Lisa moved into the house across the street, back in third grade, Simone was happy to have a girl her age so close. They were in the minority at that school, so it was natural that they were best friends. She didn't know that Lisa would grow into a mildew-smelling girl with chewed hair.

"It's not a granny bra. It's a real bra. I'm developed. You're only a B cup. Once you're a C cup, if you ever are, you'll have to get more hooks in the back like real bras have."

"For your information, Simone, my bra is a real bra. *And* it's sexy."

"For *your* information, I'm the expert when it comes to tits. Not you."

Simone had to get a new Lisa who wasn't a Lisa at all. Victoria was a Black girl and a 30A. She didn't have to wear a bra, but did. She walked around the locker room naked, showing off her flat chest. Everyone else wrapped themselves in a towel from the showers, and kept it there, stepping into underpants, facing away. Not Victoria. She flaunted her nothing-to-hide.

"She's got a training bra," Lisa told Simone, but what did that mean? It couldn't be that Victoria's breasts needed coaching on how to grow, and that Simone's had figured it out on their own. If that was true, they were the only part of Simone that was smarter. Victoria was a serious student. Serious, but happy. The combination didn't make sense. Simone watched her. She was an expert at answering questions. She wrestled teachers to uncle, from "Anyone else?" to "Yes, Victoria." Even when she answered wrong, she stayed happy. That was what curious was supposed to be, not a cop-a-feel.

Simone fumbled the attempt when switching one girl for the other. "Why do you even wear a bra? You don't need one," she told Victoria, surprised that it came out sounding like Lisa.

Victoria didn't seem to notice. "I like knowing it's there." She pulled on what

was really only a stretchy crop top in hot pink with white piping. “It’s under my clothes, but no one can see it.”

“Yeah. Under your clothes, when you wear clothes.”

“It’s all girls here,” Victoria said, still pulling, even though nothing needed adjusting.

“It’s a top with spaghetti straps. Not a bra.” It seemed that someone had to be the Lisa when two girls talked. “But it is pretty,” Simone said, trying to be nice. “And classy. I like that it doesn’t have lace. They should make real bras pretty like that. Ones for girls who have tits.”

“They don’t make pretty bras for girls who have tits?” Victoria was beaming like she always did when she learned something.

By the time they moved up a grade, Simone had secured her new Lisa who wasn’t a Lisa at all. She’d moved up in other ways too. Over the summer, more than her chest had developed, so she was ahead of Victoria in certain skills as well as in body. No matter Victoria, with her grades and her books and her hand up for the teachers, no matter Victoria, with her triple doubles and her under five-minute mile, Victoria had only kissed two boys, and one of those was a family friend her mother told her to kiss hello.

“Why do you even count that?” Simone said.

“It’s technically a kiss, Simone. By definition.”

“According to you.” Simone was only a C student in English, but her experience raised her overall share to Victoria’s level.

“Isn’t it gross?” Victoria had said about a blow job in an older boy’s family car.

“It’s way gross. But—” Simone didn’t know what the *but* was. Back then, selecting boys to drive her to the reservoir was something she did. Did, without letting them do anything back. Did, she didn’t know why.

“But what?”

“It’s gross. But that’s why you bring a Pepsi. When they’re done, you spit out the window. Then you rinse with the Pepsi. Swirl it around and spit again. After that, the Pepsi tastes regular.”

Mixed friendships like theirs stayed on school grounds, but the two talked on the phone, one in her bed on the north side, and the other in her bed on the west side. Whispering about boys pulled them in deeper than touch. It wasn’t just her experience that brought Simone to Victoria’s level, but also their family situations. Simone’s parents hadn’t gone to college, but that didn’t matter. Her father worked at Bethlehem Steel. He made good money, as good as Victoria’s dad who worked in an office. Except for the way they looked, their fathers were identical: men who worked more than one job, kept their good shoes shined, drove the family to church, and ate from the fullest plates at the table. Baltimore was becoming a city of enclaves, a patchwork of neighborhood bodies carrying a layer of blight around the hips. Simone and Victoria lived on the same block at different ends of town, safe in the bone of their district, tucked inside the outer rim of where you don’t want to be.

As in all things girl, though, it was the mothers who stuck. “I couldn’t believe it either,” Victoria sympathized on the topic of intercourse. Her mother had made chamomile tea for the conversation, and set aside an afternoon when her brother and father weren’t home. “I said to my mother, ‘Why would anyone do that?’”

“That’s what I thought!”

“It’s about love, Simone. That’s what my mother said.” Like her call-outs in math, it was an answer Simone could only square partway, a kind-of answer. Having sex with boys while you waited to fall in love, was another kind-of answer.

Victoria’s mother sounded so—*what?* Simone didn’t know. So *Victoria grown up*, she guessed. Love was a subject kept private, a subject to talk around, not straight on, especially when it came to parents. But Victoria was generous with the word. She said it to her mother while Simone was still on the phone. *Okay, Mommy. We’re hanging up soon. Good night. I love you.* She said it all the time, *I love you, Mommy*, no big deal to Victoria. So frequent, so matter of habit, meaningless when she said it, but the closeness, the intolerable warmth in the phrase—sickened Simone.

It turned out to be true that mother was like daughter, because when Simone met Victoria’s mother, they were holding hands. Not many fathers came to Parents’ Night; it was mostly mothers with their sons and daughters. Simone had been searching for Victoria, but when the two came into the room, and her friend waved with her free hand to Simone, she looked away. Everything had seemed fine up until then, but with that wave a curtain rose, a dressing room curtain, and without it Simone could no longer hide a truth she hadn’t realized she was hiding. Somehow that truth was her mother.

There was nothing wrong with Simone’s mother, nothing disqualifying. But it had been strange to walk into school, which was her world, with her mother leading the way. *Leading into battle*, the thought came to Simone, with her mother steps ahead, striding past the wall of lockers, her shoulders back, leading with her breasts, shaped by the crisscross into squat cones.

In the art room, the two daughters pointed out their drawings on display. “No, it’s good. I can tell what everything is,” Simone’s mother said about her daughter’s still life in charcoal. She wet a finger and cleaned a smudge by the signature. Simone had blurred the edges of objects on purpose, though that one there was an accident. “Now see, Simone,” her mother said, pointing to Victoria’s picture, “this is what a bowl of fruit is supposed to look like.” Simone remembers much from that night—the chalky smell of the art room, the strum of everyone talking, the belted frocks that mothers wore back then, and their hair sprayed into an enduring flip—but what she remembers most is Victoria’s mother.

“Interesting,” Victoria’s mother said. She bent down to get close to Simone’s drawing. “I like the way you manage the line and the light. You’ve given depth, exaggerated depth, to what your classmates have rendered flat. You have natural talent.”

Simone hadn't added light on purpose, but light was there, at the opposite places of her smudging. She looked at the places she knew not to touch and saw brightness.

Simone's mother was quiet on the drive home, and Simone knew why. She did the same thing. Did it a lot. In school when she was called on and didn't know the answer, or the meaning, or when asked to read aloud, she'd learned to be quiet and wait until the teacher moved on.

"Well, your friend wasn't so smart," her mother said when they were back in their neighborhood. "Even her own mother thought your picture was better."

"Mom, she's the smartest girl in the school," Simone said. "She's like a genius. And she wants to be friends with me."

"That may be so, but she can't fill out a sweater."

Simone knew what that was too. Her mother, swinging in the air at no one. Simone didn't swing back. She had already stopped thinking of herself as *developed* and was switching to a different word.

On the phone that night she said it to Victoria. "You mother thought I was smart. She called me *promiscuous*." Both daughters were safe in their bedrooms, whispering.

"What? No, she didn't. I was there the whole time, Simone. My mother never said that."

"Yes, she did. She liked me. And she liked my drawing. She thought my picture was better than yours. She told me my use of light was very advanced."

"Oh! Precocious," Victoria said. "My mother said *precocious*, not *promiscuous*."

"Same thing."

"It's not," Victoria said. "They only begin and end the same." Then maybe to be nice she said, "But they are similar. They both mean advanced, but one is advanced in the brain, and the other in the body. Promiscuous is more like smarty-body than smart."

"*You're* the smarty-body."

"If you say so, Simone. I'm just telling you that promiscuous doesn't mean smart. It means sexy. Bad sexy."

"No, it doesn't." Simone hissed away the shame in confusing the word, on top of the shame in the meaning, before pronouncing her new self. "I'd rather be the body one anyway."

For the rest of that year, and the next, and the year after that, still waiting to fall in love, Simone kept going with boys to the reservoir, but didn't bring a Pepsi anymore. It always started with her breasts. She kept her clothes as much as she could. Her bra not being pretty didn't bother him. He was the nude. He upped his T-shirt and downed his pants into a puddle where the gas and brake were. It happened fast, but she knew when to stop and look up at the face. If she was quick enough, she could catch sight of him the moment his want turned to need. ■