

TROPHIES

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“I wet the bed until about a year ago,” said Terra. “And, I mean, it was pretty embarrassing. Especially because I was married, you know?”

“Yes, I do know,” I thought to myself as I lay holding her close to me.

“But it had a lot to do with all the trauma I’ve been through,” Terra said.

I studied her body as the landscape it was. Like the earth, it had been cut, damaged, violated, and nearly destroyed. The evidence lay before me. I saw the stretch marks across her stomach extending all the way around her back, the scars from her child, the result of being raped four years earlier, at age sixteen. I thought of how unnatural looking something as beautiful as childbirth could turn out to be. I thought of the way some no-faced man thrust himself into her body and cut through. Turning her into nothing. Claiming her as his terrain. His land to plant his seed. I thought of the way I had entered her.

“You have a piercing stare,” she whispered. Was this a bad thing, I wondered? I smiled toward the warm August night sky. It was my first time with a woman. The stars speckled across the blanket above. They were beautiful, so full of hope, desire burning them brightly, carrying them to earth. I had four stars of my own sprinkled throughout my body.

My last star was on my wrist. I’m not sure why I put it there. It was an impulse move. I walked into the tattoo parlor, sat down, and put my wrist in front of the first artist available.

“Just a black outline?” he asked.

“Yes. That’s all I want. A star, outlined in black, on my wrist,” I stated.

“No shading? No color?” he continued.

“No. Just the outline,” I finished.

“It would cost you the same if you wanted some shading, you know,” he answered.

I wasn’t concerned about the money. The stars were one of the few things I missed about the desert. You could see them stretch for miles. In Riverside, you were lucky if you saw the moon shine through the smog. This one would be there for life.

I felt the sting of the needle on my wrist and then heard it buzz its way into my skin. The hum was a comforting and well-recognized sound. It was the same needle I’d embraced so many times before. We’d been intimate since I was sixteen.

I took a deep breath as I watched the ink further enter my body. Black blood smeared my wrist as the needle scraped across my skin, slowly, repeatedly, over and over and over again. There was no red, no crimson-colored pearls beading down my skin. Just the black blood ink injecting, putting its stain on me and my body. It burned. Every wound that bled was a memory forced out, denied by mouth, revealed on skin.

Terra’s words reverberated. “You have a piercing gaze.” You stare. You cut. You permeate my body, my shield. I continued my gaze through touch. I felt my

hands making their way through Terra's skin. It felt soft, warm, and welcoming. My fingers stroked gently along her arm. Nearing her hand, I felt the terrain change, the softness gone. The roughness startled me, and I had to try hard not to make my reaction obvious. What had she done to herself?

I felt a wave of sadness as my fingers continued to caress her. I lingered on the scars that lifted away from her arms, pieces to a puzzle, chapters in her life. I read her body, the Braille marks telling me to come closer. "Look," they told me, "she wears her pain on her skin the way you do."

But my scars weren't that visible. I was a surface cutter, a scratcher if anything. I never had the courage to press down the way she did. I couldn't bring myself to break through the layers of skin leading down to my veins. She cut to set something free. Her scars told a story. Mine weren't even dark enough to see, much less feel. They didn't merit the title of "cutter" reserved for people who dig below the surface.

My room was an extension of my body. I wished the lock on my door was still there. It was taken from me, stolen by my mother's boyfriend a few years after he moved in. The comforting safety of a locked room robbed, the required surveillance transforming a once private sanctuary into a prison. He stole it from me.

I could hear the heavy breathing of a person trying not to move under my bed. I lay still under my covers. Should I say something? Minutes dragged on for hours. I could hear him there rustling beneath, his body scratching across the carpet. I felt his stare through the mattress. Go away, I thought. Go away. He crawled from beneath, quietly opened the door, and left.

The visions kept coming. They would scare me awake. I dreamed of a faceless, naked man coming toward me, stomach heaving, hips thrusting, the hardness of his sex pointing toward me. I couldn't shake the dreams, even in the daytime. I felt myself getting lost and wanting to kill. I wanted to carve him into nothing. In my dreams, I forced through his body. I made him bleed. I held the knife.

I heard that sex hurt the first time for a woman. My friends talked about the way they felt, as if they were coming apart the whole time. I didn't want a man to split me open and see the whole of me exposed. I felt the urge to take and keep for myself what was mine, what made me a woman. I wanted my own hand, not anyone else's, to cause the pain.

I lay on my bed staring at the cold metal. I stroked the rod with my fingers. I had to force myself to do it. If I didn't take it, someone else would, and it would be gone, forever. He would brag to his friends about how tight I was. He would glow in the fact that he was the first to conquer my body. He would grin in thinking about the way my body tensed when he entered me, telling me it was supposed to hurt. My tears would be his trophies reminding him of the great service he had done. He would tell me the pain was normal.

I took my silver rod. I grabbed it and held it close. It was seven inches long, one inch in diameter. It was cold, like ice, ready to pierce you with the force of a thousand needles. I spread myself open. I took the rounded end of the rod and pushed it to the lips of my vagina. My body resisted the cold metal forcing an entry. I tensed. My stomach caved in toward my spine. I pushed harder. The pain was unbearable. The rod pierced me. I was cutting myself with a knife inside.

The pain was what they said, like my insides were being pulled out. I had to stop. I took out the rod and exhaled a sigh of resignation and relief. It was over. I then realized that in killing the pain, my body had gone numb.

Terra's arms reminded me of my own pain and of the dead feelings I had in that house of stolen locks. I remembered the long nights I spent staring at my arms in the dim evening light. I did it in secret.

I would sit on my floor with glass in hand. I would look to my skin, so helpless. It stared back. I could see the veins pulsing through my wrists, life pushing its way to the surface, blood forcing its way through my body with every heartbeat, every pulse. And I pushed back, forcing the shiny end of broken mirror through skin. The shard scraped across the terrain of my body. I cut, and it felt like breathing. It brought life to places that just moments before felt dead. Blood dropped like tears across my flesh, my trophies.