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Serenading Flesh

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Serenading Flesh

The first time I cut myself was with a mint-green plastic floss pick. The type that the dentist gives you in a small bag after they tell you to floss more. The ones with the sharp pick at the end designed to dig the plaque from the crevices of your teeth. Meant to expel bacteria from your mouth and ensure good oral hygiene.

The second time I cut myself was with a piece of sea glass in the glass bowl that sat on top of the upstairs toilet. I dragged the rough edge over the flesh of my thigh, but didn't manage to leave much but a small, stinging scratch. I reveled in the sting and for that moment, it was enough.

I tried an old pocket knife my dad had given me. The blade was basically rounded. It didn't do much. He didn't know that his gift had been used as a vessel for my own self-hatred.

I soon upgraded to a butter knife. I felt like a thief in the night, sneaking into the kitchen drawer to slip the knife up my sleeve. It only felt like a mission to me; no one would have batted an eye if they saw me grabbing something as insignificant as a butter knife.

I sat in my bedroom and took the butter knife out of my nightstand drawer. I ran my finger over the dull, jagged edge of the blade. I pressed it to my wrist and pushed down, dragging the knife's small teeth over the tender skin. I pressed down over and over, eventually forming an angry red line. Staring at the knife meant to be dripping with syrup, I instead saw traces of my pain.

Eventually, a mini Exacto knife came into my possession. I have no memory of where it came from, but it was the most effective tool I had used thus far. It danced into my hand and seduced my fingers. The blade was the Sirens and my skin the sailors. The sweet serenade of bare flesh begging to be painted on. *Please mark me*, it whispered, *show me your agony, breathe me your sins*.

I let the cool metal glide over my skin like my mother skimming the top layer of cream off our milk.

I gathered up my internal pain and forced it to the outside. Please look at me. I wore short sleeves in gym class and nobody looked at me. They didn't see, or they didn't want to. Besides, all I had managed to do was make my arm look like I swung it through a bramble patch. There were no deep gouges or trickling wounds. There were only half-committed attempts at pleading with the world to see me.

When I was a child, I often felt a well of guilt bubbling in my stomach. There were times in which I was sad, too sad, and I had no valid reason as to why. Unlike many of my friends, my parents were not divorced. In fact, they loved each other very much and still showed their love to each other in a way that often dissipates in long marriages. They were incredibly supportive of me and my younger sister, telling us they were proud when we brought home good grades or won an award at school. I was extremely close with my little sister, feeling that she was more of my twin rather than two years younger. We would spend hours in imaginary worlds, needing nothing but each other's company to fill our time.

My family was steadily middle class, sometimes dipping lower, but seldom revealing that fact to me or my sister. We went on vacation to Florida, we got new clothes for the first day of school, and our Christmases were plentiful. We lived in a small, safe town. We were liked by others in our community. On the surface, I had absolutely nothing to complain about.

My friends talked about fathers who left them on the side of the road in a fit of anger, fathers who cheated on mothers and put their children in the middle, mothers who got pulled over for DWIs while their child was in the car. My parents had never yelled at me. They read to me when I was little and stayed in my room until I was ready to go to sleep. They played with me. They parented.

I wanted something to be wrong in my life, so I could have a reason for feeling the way I did. I didn't yet know about chemical imbalances. I was unaware of the mental illness essentially spilling out of both sides of my family. I was unaware that while I was growing up and feeling lost, my grandmother and uncle were squatting in our old house. That my parents filed a restraining order because my uncle threatened to kidnap my sister and me. That my loving grandparents had made my mother's adolescent life miserable. That my father's adopted side of the family saved him. That there was deep-rooted generational trauma overflowing in my veins. That I was the way I was for a reason, though those reasons hadn't yet revealed themselves to me. I had a

sixth sense when I was young that I was on edge for a reason. I knew there was something wrong, I was just too young to be exposed to it all.

Trauma is genetic, and my parents had enough for all of us. They wanted better for my sister and me, and because of this, they tried to be the most exceptional parents there ever were. Trauma can sneak up on you. I think that maybe it snuck up on all of us.

As I got older, the bubbles of guilt turned acidic and ate through my insides. Why was I always so on edge? Why could I never breathe? Every time my parents were late to a soccer game, I was convinced that they were dead on the side of the road with our car burning beside them. Fear came along with the deep sadness emanating from my core. I did not understand myself. Why did I want something to be wrong with me so badly?

This past summer, my mother and sister traveled to Switzerland on a school trip, and brought me back a Swiss army knife with my name engraved on the front; a classic tourist souvenir. I said nothing. I smiled at my sister and thanked her. *Why are you giving me this?* I wanted to scream, *why are you handing me all that taunts me?* I had never directly told her about my relationship with knives, but my mother knew. She knew, and she thought it was fine to put it in my hand. The smile on my face felt plastic. I felt sick. Yes, I was doing so much better. Yes, I had been in therapy for three years and was almost one year clean. It felt like a test that my mother was unaware she was giving: *Are you better yet?*

I told my boyfriend about it. He told me to get rid of it. I said I would. I didn't.

A month or so later, he asked me if there were any knives in my apartment, and I pulled out a small blade. I kept it hidden like a security blanket. A just-in-case. A last resort. He told me to get rid of it and reminded me that I had promised before that I wouldn't have knives around me. He told me that if it happened again, we were done. I didn't let the tears fall. Would he say the same thing to a heroin addict? I watched him inhale sickly sweet-flavored nicotine and blow a cloud around us. We all have our addictions, don't we?

When I traveled home for a funeral, my mother had laid out the Switzerland souvenirs that I hadn't taken with me to school. "You forgot these." *No, Mom, I really didn't.* There was a keychain, a small bag with the country's flower, and the knife. I hadn't even remembered where I had put it, how had she found it?

I picked up the knife and flipped it open. The current state of my life was dismal. My great-grandmother had died, and while that in and of itself was sad, it was not unexpected. However, the familial chaos that ensued was exhausting, and I was old enough now to hear the conversations and nod along.

I edited her eulogy. I stood at the front of the church and read words from the Bible that meant nothing to me. Hardly anyone in the family stepped up, so I did.

I ran my finger over the sharp blade. It was clean, it wasn't dull, it was perfect. The skin on the back of my wrist was screaming at me, begging me. *Caress me*, it screeched, *let me take your pain*.

The blade kissed my flesh but did not bite it. I put it down, shuddering. I wanted someone to tell me they were proud of me. I had to settle for myself, for my unmarked skin.

There are so many stories I could tell. Stories with pages of backstory and context. There are reasons upon reasons that I have dissected in therapy. Observing myself and my actions like a specimen, *why am I the way I am?* There are times that I am so grateful for the life I have that it is hard to believe I could ever hate it or myself. I see my privilege spell itself out to me, and the guilt from my childhood sneaks back in.

We all hurt. We probably always will. And sometimes it will pull us under and we will fight not to drown. I have days where I remember the darkness, the all-consuming blanket it threw over me. I remember why I serenaded my flesh with violence, and I consider doing it again. I crave the release.

Then I am reminded of how circumstances change, and how quickly. I think about days when I smile so hard it hurts, in the most beautiful of ways, and my side cramps up from laughing too hard. Pain can be lovely. I think about the people who care for me, genuinely, and it shocks me a bit how many faces flash through my mind; the same mind that told me I was worthless, that everyone hated me, that they were better off without the constant drag that bore my name.

I hurt to feel and I feel to survive. I hope you do not understand.
But if you do, try to let the sun sing you a lullaby. Find other ways to scream.