

WOUNDS

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I cut myself when I was younger, trying to make my outsides match my insides. I slit my wrists in the bath the night that my mother told me she'd only asked for custody so my father couldn't have me. Slit them the right way, palm to elbow. I passed out from blood loss, but woke when the water grew cold, pale new skin glowing beneath the dried blood, beneath the murky water. I could cut myself and watch it heal, almost before I put the knife down. Once I let the knife dig deeply while cooking dinner at my father's house, through the bone in my thumb. Even the nail was back by morning.

I've pierced my ears so many times I've lost count. If I sleep without earrings in they heal over before morning, and I must redo them before class, or go without earrings that day. Tattoos last longer. The colors melt back into my skin within a month, white and yellow first, blue and the black outlines last. By the time I moved back to my father's house, the tattoo I would have gotten to annoy my mother would be all but gone. By the time I came back to her house, she would have forgotten it completely.

After the divorce, the only thing that stayed constant was my body. Everything else I'd lose track of, forget at one house or the other. The first thing I put there for safekeeping was a green grass glass bracelet my father brought back for me from India when I was six. It lay smoothly under the skin of my forearm, just a thin ridge to indicate where it was. I'd run my fingers over the lump in the hired car on the

way to the airport to the other house, remember how excited I'd been opening the present, how the translucent green band had sparkled in sunlight. Next thing I put away was a locket, given to me by my grandmother. I didn't like the chain around my neck, but couldn't risk losing it. I cut deeply one night and slid it in there for safekeeping. I set off metal detectors at the airport. I would tell them it was a pin in my elbow, and they'd look at the lump and believe me. After that, it became habit. A ring from a family vacation when I was ten. Black fossilized sharks' teeth from beachcombing with my grandfather. The ballerina charm from a bracelet my aunt had owned before me. They all slipped easily below my skin, lay quietly where I put them, out of sight, on my mind. It worked for years. I grew up, went to college, still saving memories beneath my skin, still storing my past where I could touch it.

It was March, one of those beautiful sunny days that make you think that winter has ended. I was lying in the grass in the sun, soaking it up, wishing I could condense spring into something small enough to slide beneath my skin. He was playing Frisbee with a friend and not watching his steps. When he landed on my arm, I felt something snap. It wasn't until the expected pain didn't follow that I realized what he'd broken. Not my wrist, but my bracelet.

"Oh god." He was older, though not by much, and unfamiliar, probably a junior back from abroad. He dropped the Frisbee and crouched beside me. "I'm so sorry. I should have been paying attention. I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you badly? Do you think I broke anything?"

I struggled up, clutching my arm. I could feel the pieces of glass moving around beneath my skin, causing more damage every time I moved my hand. My arm swelled between my fingers. I didn't want to bleed where he could see. "Hand me my bandana? I think it's just sprained, nothing major. I'll ice it tonight. If I could just wrap it now, I'm sure it'll be fine."

He picked up the handkerchief I'd been using to tie my hair back from where I'd tossed it on the ground when I'd lain down earlier. He had to fold it for me, and helped me wind the bandage round my arm firmly, had to tie the edges of it so it didn't unravel as soon as I took my hand away. He helped me up and fussed over me, asking again if I'd be okay, if I needed to go to a doctor, or the health center. He picked up the books I'd scattered around me before napping, insisted on carrying them to my room. I showed him where to put the books, promised I'd call him if it got worse or needed to be looked at, and politely shoved him out the door.

I kept the knife in my medicine cabinet, above the sink, so all I needed was

something to put the glass pieces in as I rinsed them out. Some were large enough to feel. Most were not, so I simply systematically slit my arm and held it open under the tap, one section at a time, all the way around my arm. When I thought I'd got as much out as possible, I sat back and let it heal. It blossomed red with inflammation and infection where I had missed pieces, but I knew they'd work their way out in their own time.

He came by the next day, to make sure I was still okay. I jumped when the phone rang. No one called me.

"It's Tom," said the unfamiliar voice. "I'm so sorry. I'm at the front desk--may I come up?"

I grabbed the bandana off my dresser when he hung up, barely got it tied in place before he came through my door. His face fell when he saw it.

"Still sore?"

"A little," I agreed. From the glass fragments, though, not his foot. The skin under the bandage was red and slightly swollen from the glass.

"I should have been paying attention. I'm usually more careful."

I sat in the papasan, pulled my legs up under me and watched him pace the room.

"God," he said. "I can't believe I did that to you." He flopped in the chair across from me, then bounced back to his feet. "What's this?"

This was the saucer I'd dumped the pieces I'd rescued into. "It was a bracelet. I was wearing it yesterday." I tried to keep it as close to the truth as possible.

"I didn't see it."

"It broke when you stepped on me. I had to go back and get it this morning."

He stirred the pieces delicately with a finger, picked up one of the larger ones, and held it in the light from the window. "It's beautiful," he said. "It can't be fixed, can it? Was it valuable?"

"Only sentimentally," I said. "My dad got it for me in India when I was little."

He dropped the piece as though he'd been bitten. It took nearly all my persuasive powers to get him to stop apologizing and leave. I finally resorted to yawning obviously and not denying it. He finally got the hint, but paused in the doorway. "Maybe I'll see you around again?"

The next morning, when the phone rang from the front desk, it was my dad. He looked nervous when I met him in the lobby. I'd thrown on jeans and a t-shirt, wrapped the bandanna around my arm again. He was in a suit and tie, clean shaven

and smelling of the same aftershave he'd always worn as long as I could remember. He shifted from one foot to the other, gestured awkwardly past the desk to the double doors and the quad.

"Want to go for a little walk?"

I stomped my curiosity down into a small neat ball in the back of my head, and agreed. We walked, not through the quad, but down the hill to the river trail.

"I was in town for a meeting," he began awkwardly. "Thought I should see how you'd settled in."

I stared at him in disbelief, and he flushed slightly and looked away. I couldn't remember what his job was exactly, but I didn't think there was anything he'd be in this town about. We walked in silence for a few more minutes, then he tried again.

"I always loved walking on this stretch of the trail while I was here." He cleared his throat nervously. "I met your mother here."

I looked at him again, and this time he met my eyes.

"I stopped by, because, well, I missed you. Haven't seen you in eight months. I guess I'd gotten more accustomed to you being around than I'd realized." He paused, cleared his throat again. "We treated you so badly, didn't we? I never meant it to be that way."

We walked in silence again. I didn't know why he was silent, but I was trying to stifle the voices that kept welling up inside me. *Why did you then*, I wanted to ask. *Why didn't you ever stop?*

"Do you remember," he said finally, "going to the beach? You must have been nine. The whole family was there." I nodded mutely, ran a hand down my hip, felt the ancient hard triangles beneath my fingertips, beneath my jeans, beneath my skin.

"I went beach combing with Granddad."

He nodded. "It was the last time we all did something together." I folded my hands together, rubbing the ring finger of my right hand as I always did when I was thinking. I felt the hard ridge there as he continued speaking. "We went to some tacky store, and I let you pick out anything you wanted. The whole store, and what did you pick?"

A ring, I mouthed as he said it. My thumb rubbed the callus below my ring finger.

"Anything in the store, and you picked an ugly black ring. So big you had to wear it on your thumb to keep it from slipping off."

"Hematite." I said gruffly.

“What?”

I cleared my throat and repeated myself. “Hematite. It’s iron ore. Black and shiny like a beetle shell.”

He nodded. “I’d forgotten how much you liked bugs back then. We thought you’d loose the ring. We were sure of it. I went back to the store the next day, bought another ring just in case you lost it.” He stopped walking, and turned to look at me. “You didn’t. Not then anyways. Whatever happened to it? Did you lose it moving from one house to the other?”

I swallowed, feeling the hard lump in my throat, the hard lump under my skin. I had to clear my throat again. “I still have it. I put it someplace safe so I wouldn’t lose it.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment again, just looked at me. “You look so much like your mother did when I met her.” He blinked rapidly and checked his watch. “I’ve got to go. The plane just stopped here for refueling.” He pulled a card case out of his coat pocket, and took two cards out of it. “One for you, and one for you to write your number and email on. Next time I’ll warn you before I come through town. I just . . . I just wanted to see you.”

When he hugged me I stiffened as usual, but it wasn’t as uncomfortable as it usually was. I swallowed heavily as he walked back up the hill to the road. There was a town car there, idling by the side of the road. He turned and waved before he got in, and I waved back automatically. When I dropped my hand back down to my side it felt funny, heavier than it usually was. I spread it open before me and looked for the first time in 5 years at the shiny black of chitin, of hematite on my ring finger. I worked it slowly off my finger as I walked back to the dorm, examined the skin below it. Smooth and unmarked, not surprisingly, but there was no blood, no sign that it had just so recently been hiding anything.

I meant to put it back away when I got back to the room, but I’d put the knife someplace strange the last time I’d used it, and while I was looking for it, Tom knocked on the door. My right hand grabbed my left wrist, comforted by the feel of cloth.

“Come in. I’ll be just a minute.”

In the bathroom I peeled the bandanna off, looked with some worry at the still inflamed marks on my arm. I couldn’t use the knife with him in the other room, but I thought soaking it under the hot water for a couple of minutes would help loosen up the sores. I’d never had something heal so slowly before, but then again, deep or long or wide as they might have been, the cuts I’d made had been clean and

planned. It was probably just my body trying to work the glass bits out the only way it could. I soaked it and scraped it a bit more than I'd been planning to when I'd gone in the bathroom, pulled a few thin splinters of glass out with the tweezers, and rewrapped the bandana on a much less inflamed wrist. I was still a little worried, but it wasn't as though I could go to the doctor's office.

He was still in the living room, sprawled on the couch, when I came out of the bathroom and through the bedroom. He looked up when I came through the door, colored slightly and tossed the chick magazine he'd been reading back onto the stack by my chair. He stood up clumsily and held out a bag. "Here. I brought you something. It's nothing much."

I took the bag and sank down in my chair. He dropped back on the couch and watched me. "No one's ever given me..."

"Hush," he said. "You can't thank me until after you open it. Don't you know how these things work?"

I shook my head, but smiled, and pulled the newspaper wrapped package out of the plastic bag.

"Some wrapping job, ain't it? Did it all myself." I jerked my head up in surprise and caught him smiling at me. "Go on then. Open it."

The newspaper tore easily, giving me a glimpse of a muted sparkle, a glint of forest green. I rested the present on my knees and used both hands to wrestle with the taped corners. He sat up and grabbed it just before I wrestled it off my lap and held it steady for me. A gasp escaped me when I got all of the paper off them. "Oh. Oh, they're beautiful." He'd brought me plates, smooth glass circles just slightly darker than the green grass glass bracelet I'd been wearing. In the light they glowed an emerald green. "Oh, you shouldn't have done this. I can't take them. It's too much."

He stood and stretched, overfilling my usually empty room for a flash, then smiled down at me. "I saw them at a yard sale walking back to my place yesterday. They were nothing, a dollar a plate."

There were five of them in my lap; I held them up to the light one at a time. I caught sight of him glancing at his watch while I admired the plates, and my heart actually fell. I choked that down though, set the plates purposefully aside and picked up the torn paper and tape, stuffing them into the now-empty bag.

"I don't want to keep you," I said. He flushed slightly, and I scolded myself for trying to get rid of him so bluntly. Especially when I didn't want to get rid of him. "I was going to ask if you wanted to go to the Union, but if you have plans already,

maybe we could do something later?" I held my breath waiting for his reply so the tightness in my chest could be attributed to oxygen deprivation. He looked at his watch again though it had just been seconds ago and I braced myself against the sharp sudden pain of rejection.

"Look, I'm meeting some friends to go to a coffeeshop, but I can be a little late, if you want to come." I was stunned into immobility. This? This was all it would have taken to make friends earlier? A bruised wrist and a sob story about a bracelet? I see-sawed, torn between an unusual desire for human company and a wish for the quiet and solitude of the room to myself again. He took my silence for a no--and it might have been. "Please do come. They're all nice people, and it'll just be for a few hours."

"I don't usually go out." One of my programmed rebuffs rose to my lips unasked for, but he was unfazed.

"Come on. If your wrist acts up, I'll walk you back early."

He wouldn't take no for an answer. In a relatively short span of time he'd bullied me into a coat and gloves as the spring weather of the days before a memory already, and coaxed me out of the room and down the hall to the lobby. I had a confused impression of a great many people, or possibly a much smaller but more active group as they all jostled for greetings and to exit the building. I lost track of Tom for a moment, and considered panic until a quiet voice greeted me by name. With a little thought I remembered her from a class this quarter and last, and talking of a lecture from the previous term kept me occupied until we reached the coffee shop. It helped that at one point I caught sight of Tom up ahead, checking back over his shoulder for me. I smiled at him, he smiled in return and went back to his conversation.

At the coffee shop we got drinks and jostled again for position, this time around a table that was actually much too small for the group of us. I sipped my drink and listened to them bicker over what we'd do now. A splinter group formed, pulling most of the boys off to play something fast-paced and loud not too far away. Tom pulled his chair around to sit by me, and I relaxed a little more, listening as the girls around me began to discuss their families, a rolling wave of love and annoyance moving around the table. I listened to the voices so at odds with the words, the complaints, soft-voiced and slow, the avowals of familial hatred with a note of laughter underneath.

I must have looked wistful, for Tom nudged me as one girl finished her story. "Go on. Everyone has a good story about their family. Even the bad ones do

something right, or you wouldn't still be here."

I looked at the ring on my hand again, and told about my mother's mother, Sybil. As I talked about her, I rubbed the flat lump by my elbow. I told about the parrot whose picture is engraved in the locket, how he'd walk down one shoulder, across her chest, and back up the other side with no trouble. A knot in my chest loosened, the lump in my throat that I thought I'd have to get used to dissolved as I talked. It became easier to breathe, and easier to talk than to stop. I did though, and let others have a turn, this time listening for the affection as well as the disgust, what they didn't say as much as what they did. I continued rubbing the lump as I listened, remembering the good times for a change, and it seemed right that when I finally took my hand off my elbow to pick up my drink, the chain for the locket was draped around my fingers, and it chinked as it tapped the glass. I untangled my fingers, clicked the locket open for the first time in years, looked at the paired portraits of a woman and her bird. I felt Tom's shoulder against my back as he looked over my shoulder, and wondered if my mother loved my dad this way when they met, if my dad got nervous and shaky when he saw her.

We stood awkwardly at the front door to my building.

"We're on for lunch after class tomorrow then? And you've got my email just in case?"

I nodded, flourishing the paper he'd given me. "Right he--ouch." I examined the paper cut on my finger, watching the blood well up, stain the edge of the paper.

"You okay?"

I rubbed a finger across the cut, watching the blood well up again and again. "I really am." I said finally. "Or at least, I think I'm getting there."

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