

The Marks on Gemma's Hide

Gemma's thumb and index finger pulled the flesh taut. The two fingers dug into her skin as they stretched its surface area to its upper limit, and in response, it smarted. Her teeth clenched. The muscles in her neck were sore. She had craned it into the uncomfortable position that allowed her to see her backside many times already.

Pools of purple had gathered just beneath the surface of her epidermis, and the bruising that blossomed in many shades across her left ass cheek reminded her of curdled milk. The tighter she pulled the bit of flesh, the more the bruises began to resemble watercolor blossoms. A Nick Drake song was stuck in her head.

Thumb and forefinger released, and the skin snapped back into position. Gemma scanned the mirror above the sink, and with a few repeated glances her body's tension eased slightly, but she did not let go of the suspicion that at any moment someone would stumble into the dormitory bathroom, looking to relieve himself or herself of a night's worth of drinking.

Curdling was a common theme in Gemma's thoughts at this ungodly hour. She approached the bathroom mirror and tilted her head to the side, bathing her neck in fluorescent light, which illuminated a framework of bite marks. She squinted until the bites transformed into a pink network of lace. The shattered capillaries curdled along her raw hide. Her stomach curdled because she didn't know which drawer contained her scarf and because she didn't have the right shade of concealer to cover the hickies pulled out onto the flesh of her milky white neck.

Fingertips pushed their way against her scalp. She picked through the roots of her hair, and rested the unharmed side of her ass against the smooth edge of the porcelain sink basin. The cold surprised her bare skin, which immediately swelled with goose bumps—this sudden transformation also arousing pain in the network of purple pools.

A steady ticking emitting from her wristwatch reminded Gemma that it was three thirty. Her heavy head longed for its pillow. She had come into the bathroom nearly an hour ago in the hopes of brushing her teeth, but instead she had craned her neck and scanned the array of purples over and over. She was undressed for a

shower, but she never managed to push herself into the stall. She quickly brushed her teeth, and spat the mixture of saliva and paste into the basin. The mint green mixture was speckled with a bright red, and as she looked upon her blood, she realized that her gums were smarting. It must have been the cigarettes that she couldn't deny in her drunken state that made the smooth flesh of her gums feel as if it had been exposed to sand paper. Her tongue still detected nicotine after the half-assed brushing, but Gemma was so drained from fixation that she tried to ignore it. She covered her porcelain and purple flesh with a bath towel and padded her way back to her room. Her bare feet stuck to the linoleum of the bathroom floor, and then brushed their way along well-trodden and slightly soiled carpet.

Gemma had wanted to be touched. There was no denying that.

The downy pillow finally received Gemma's head. She pressed another pillow against her person, cradling it like she would another body. She closed her eyes and listened to the busy city street below. Drunken voices reverberated off the wet pavement outside and wound in through her bedroom window, along with the wind that made her curtains dance, their corners brushing along her purple, exposed behind, like curious fingertips. She didn't care to cover herself with her sheets, afraid that such contact would make the prickling pain all the more excruciating.

Many of her days were spent walking alone along those bustling streets. Gemma would wear headphones. The music that reverberated through her ears muted the streets that she marched along, often in perfect step to the bass line of an old big band tune or to the 808 of an nineties rap anthem. This did a combination of things for Gemma. Most importantly, it made her feel safe. Untouchable. Not because she didn't want to be touched, but because she had discovered by now that despite being surrounded by a street full of kindred spirits, not one would slow to interact with her. It was as if she was part of a massive game, one in which the rules dictated that everyone must remain on a separate plane. It also allowed the seemingly aimless wanderings of the populace to adhere to a beat—the rushing individuals transforming into dancers on a cosmopolitan stage. Sometimes the beat so fit the way a man would skirt to the left to avoid a crouching old woman in a purple overcoat who was scooping her grandson into her arms or the way a man flicked his

wrist to lift a cigarette to his lips that Gemma could not help but grin, at the risk of looking absurd to the others just trying to push past her. Sometimes the songs that overpowered the sounds of sirens and rusty bike brakes so conflicted with the street scene that a curdling blossomed within Gemma, one kindred to that which was currently experiencing.

Gemma felt like a voyeur when she tromped through the streets below, her mind forcing what it saw to conform to the sensory experience provided by her headphones. It was beautiful to be on the outside looking in on the people that populated her city. But the beauty carried with it a hollow feeling. As Gemma traced the paths of businesswomen in grey pants suits and punk rock teens with over processed neon purple hair, her heart strings would pull taught as if her thumb and index finger were separating the two ventricles of her heart. Gemma knew that these people, for what seemed like such arbitrary reasons, would always be strangers to one another and to her. An invisible code inhibited her from approaching someone waiting for their bus and asking them if she could read them a few lines of "America" by Ginsberg. She couldn't ask them how they were doing and expect an honest answer. No cigarette would pass between her lips and those of another commuters. And most of all, she couldn't reach out and touch them. Nor could she expect to be touched in return.

Gemma listened to the uneven steps of a drunken man who walked past her building. She could hear the leather soles of his dress shoes abrade against the cobblestones. The contact between the two surfaces made a loud slapping noise, one that too closely resembled a sound that had been echoing through Gemma's mind. She wondered what motivation was pushing him along the path he was taking. She imagined the various scenarios that could explain where he was walking from and why he was alone as she softly drifted into sleep. The last conscious thoughts to filter through her soon-to-rest mind circulated around a few words that a stranger had muttered to her three hours prior.

"We both know that this is what you want."

Gemma met him on the first night in a long time that she had gone walking without her headphones. She wanted to ignore the code that disallowed interaction

with strangers, so after a few solitary swigs of whiskey, she headed into the night. She wanted to be touched. She didn't even care how he looked as she coerced him into taking her back to his place. But instead of touching her, he hit.

Thanks to a bright pair of yellow socks that reminded Gemma of the lederhosen she had seen the men wearing at Oktoberfest, the stranger stood out from his crowd of friends. The group of young men was walking through the night, slowly making their way between Newsagent and food truck, when he caught her eye. The yellow socks pulled her in, head filled with memories of overflowing steins and braided hair. If she had been sober, the socks would have had an entirely different effect. She would have detested the indiscretion that allowed the tall man to leave his knee high socks visible, the indiscretion to allow such a man to even consider wearing such a tacky article of clothing. On this night, she approached him.

“Are you German?”

“I'm sure at one point my family was German, but why do you ask?”

The two ended up immersed in a conversation with topics that seemed absurd to Gemma in retrospect. When they noted that they had a shared interest in Nick Drake, the man had pulled her into the shadows and kissed her. The texture of his rough beard abraded against her soft skin upon the initial contact.

That's how Gemma imagined the interaction had taken place anyway. When she had gone over it, several times over, while inspecting the marks on her hide, she tried her best to restructure the fragments of memory she had left of the intoxicated interaction.

Hand in hand, the two walked for a period of time that Gemma could no longer quantify. They wandered through labyrinthine streets until the man stopped outside her building. He held his door open for her, and then the two ascended innumerable stairs, several staircases maybe, that laid themselves out in ways that had no logical order—not one that Gemma's mind was capable of constructing, anyway. The stranger placed Gemma on his bed.

Candlelight filled the small space that he inhabited. Or maybe it was a naked light bulb placed in one of the corners. Either way, the light source filled the room with a reddish hue, tracing the outlines of the room's perimeter. The ceiling was

slanted, so she knew he had taken her to the top floor. In the middle of the room was the bed, sloppily covered with a white bedspread. There were no dressers, no wardrobe. Only a sink in the corner and a window that looked over a landscape that was too dark to take in. Gemma insisted they play Nick Drake.

She does not remember getting undressed. Or the dirty talk she may have whispered in his ear. Only the sound of slaps ricocheting through the red light of the top floor room and the senseless muttering of “no, no, no...” The violent slapping battled the soft folk guitar, and the two discordant noises conjured a cacophony that filled the room until Gemma felt that she was choking.

Gemma had been too afraid to look him straight in the eyes, lest she arouse some sort of confrontation. She yearned to trace the features of his face, to revisit the scratchy beard and commit it to memory, but knew such an opportunity would not arise as long as he was busy scrutinizing her the way he was. “We both know that this is what you want.”

She was on top. Slap after slap filled the room with violent sound and after the thirtieth hit Gemma was adapting. She anticipated the contact as he withdrew his arm and then brought it crashing back. His mouth was pulled taught into a grin. She no longer winced as his open palm met her bare flesh. Was it thirty or forty now? And how many times had she said no?

Biting him had not worked. She had clamped her teeth around his collarbone as hard as she could muster, hoping that causing him pain would communicate that she was sick of the shower of undeserved slaps. She did not want to hurt him, but had no idea how else to communicate to the man that so outsized her. Her bite did not suffice, and merely convinced him that she was enjoying the rough play. Thus, he began to alternate slaps with bites. Only she was sure he had bit her much harder than she had bit him.

Gemma only wanted to be touched.