

Her tongue found them first on the backs of her upper incisors while she was driving home from work. Lulled out of corporate anxiety by Ira Glass's kind and perfect voice. Sweeping her tongue over her teeth metronomically, in time with the reedy thump of some big string instrument backing the program. Left, right. Left, right. Thump, thump. She was still half an hour from home when she became conscious of the ridges. At first she figured they were plaque. Still, she couldn't leave them alone.

At home it was straight to the bathroom. Brushing changed nothing. Neither did flossing, which was expected; nor did stabbing at her teeth with a dental pick, which wasn't.

The other side of the dental pick was a little round mirror. By gaping around that mirror and with her phone's camera and flash on, she found the ridges, saw the tiny letters they formed, and read them:

*MARIA WAS HERE*

Once she knew to look, they were everywhere.

Well so for me the issue wasn't finding them. Even as a baby I knew they were there, my mom said, because I'd scratch at a place until it bled or chew on myself and her stopping me led to fits of screaming she still hasn't recovered from. Fully. Still hasn't quite forgotten about and hears in her dreams. And well I've always had the scars so I know this is the truth. Teeth marks from a baby set of biters long gone.

You can feel them here along the side of my elb... Yeah, there. You can press harder. Feel that? Well yeah I know there's scar tissue there, obviously, but beneath that, etched in the bone. Maria was here. Maria was here, and here, and here.

Can you imagine me as a baby? Clawing at myself. Screaming at my mom when she brought out the mittens. Can you imagine those words being the first you ever learned to read?

I'm just saying. It strikes me as kind of selfish at the end of the day. What Maria did. And if I ever met her somehow I'd probably have words.

Think you could undo the left mitten here? My thumb is itching like hell.

Finding them, for me, felt the way it does to finally sink the key in after missing the keyhole a dozen times. So many years I spent ambling drunk down some apartment hallway, squinting out the bilious light from strips in the ceiling and unable to locate my door. Verdigris key in hand. Flakes of nickel-green creviced in my fingers. Sour carpet and water damage that made the walls give if I ever leaned against them. Everything tilted and smelling of future vomit.

Vertiginous in an unfamiliar place, is how I felt until I found them.

She had left her name inside me, written in reticular red in the dermis overlying the left radius and medial aspect of the right distal tibia. *Maria was here*. Capillaries formed the feminine script. I felt the evidence of her elsewhere, in places too deep to investigate: beneath this body's— breasts and somewhere along the furiously innervated flesh of its labia. Her signature hid inside birth marks and the pattern of freckles on the back of my neck. Even my fucking hairline grew in the undeniable shape of an M.

This body was used. Secondhand. Could never have been mine.

Maria had been bequeathed the truth by a Californian shaman who referred to himself as the Flaxen Shepherd. His real name was Depp Erhardt

Oh my god Depp **stop** not funny but he didn't go by that ever. She'd heard about him from her sorority-assigned Big, whom he'd shepherded through a series of ayahuasca experiences last year. The Big had nothing negative to say about him except he chewed his toenails whenever he was high. This was to ground himself. It was non-negotiable.

Maria could have at that point only *probably* recognized a joint without help and was still shrugging off the embarrassment of telling her Big that Midol made her loopy. Her only vices were social cigarettes and this compulsion to scratch her name into things. Bathroom stall paint. Wooden picnic tables at the park. The flawless leather backseat of her father's '61 Tempest (how angry he'd been!) with a safety pin. Even her bedroom window, using one of the diamond earrings she'd been given for her Sweet Sixteen while she was shut in there as punishment for the thing with the backseat.

*how many how many how **many** how **many** how many*

The point was Maria hadn't been ready for all that an experience with the Flaxen Shepherd entailed. She and he and Big all planned a weekend at the Shepherd's parents' estate with its heated pool and egg-shaped lounge chairs and a mountain of stemless fuzzy weed grown somewhere in his mother's massive garden. Maria perceived it as a pile of purple fur, like someone had dyed a dog fuschia then shaved it. And then the DMT put her all the way on her ass and they never even approached the foot of that mountain the entire weekend. As far as she could tell.

The thing with DMT was that it was supposed to show you truths which in your altered state you would be open to receiving, understanding, and over the course of the next few days or weeks, forgetting. The experience was meant to change you only in small digestible ways, such

that you were still a person on earth at the end of it. Still interfacing with other persons but with maybe a bit more empathy on your side. Tolerance. Still flawed and solipsistic and convinced of the brevity of life.

#### **RUBY RED FRICTIONLESS TAIL**

#### **MY BIG HAS A RED TAIL AND LEGS AND I IMAGINE *THE WIDTH OF MY HAND BETWEEN THEM***

Well here's a list of truths to which Maria was awakened under the Flaxen Shepherd's round blue eye:

- 1) You are the center of no one's Universe except your own. *I never said that*
- 2) There is a Hell inside You, one You spend this brief life never learning to endure because You are so certain it will end, and the afterlife is simply a physical turning-inside-out of You such that You are inside Hell. What makes it unendurable, then, is the endlessness. By gaining awareness of this difference between internal and external Hells, that endlessness is translated to the internal Hell such that it effectively mirrors the future external one.
- 3) There is a non-zero chance that some combination of compounds found in your favorite brand of ruby red hair dye, your horse tail conditioner, and any nameless chemical running loose in the tap water might some day all react unfavorably to produce a Corrosive that eats through a significant thickness of scalp and skull before you are able to fully remove it from your skin. Maria might have seen this in some horror movie with her friends at The Majestic downtown or in a nightmare.
- 4) When we die our physical Bodies are salvaged and recycled. The last truly new Body belonged to King Tomislav of Croatia in the 10th century CE; all Bodies since then are actually pre-owned. The Body that once belonged to Tomislav is

now being piloted by a man in Waterville, Maine with three-ish teeth and a ridiculous gift for harpooning fish with a ballpoint pen.

And here is what faded in the days or weeks that followed:

1) The corrosive chemical nightmare stuff.

For the rest of her short life, Maria walked around knowing things we're all supposed to forget.

**nightmare stuff**

**baseless silly hey are you crying**

While the Truth of Corrosives receded like late morning fog, the Truths of Universe, Hells, and Bodies pooled and congealed and stained the inside of her skull. Her whole life she'd nurtured this hunger for proof of permanence and belonging. Hence the scratching. Now, to be assured of how peripheral she was to others turned that hunger (that Hell) from a baseless compulsion into full-tilt obsession. How many times would she have to mark her presence, remind others she existed, that she was real, before they really saw her? How many scores in tanned flesh before a man couldn't admire his car without thinking of his daughter's fingers at piano. How many imperfections in a pane of glass before the boys on the street got curious about the girl inside and maybe asked her to play. How many bathroom stall messages before they reached the girls at the cool table with their purses and slippery ponytails. Thigh gaps to accommodate the heads of the boys on the street

*WHEN WOULD I GET TO ACCOMODATE?*

It hadn't been enough, had it? Now she knew why, and what she had to do.

She left the first marks on the backs of her teeth. Pulled out hair selectively. Peeled back skin and rearranged small blood vessels to spell her name. Wrote the Truths of Universe, Hells, and Bodies over and over again on her chest and belly crosshatched and overlapping. These rules

would pass on to her body's next owner along with all her notes reminding them she'd been there. Never too far from the center of their universe. Never left in the backseat or behind a window or eating lunch in the girls' room again. Try to forget me while my name gives you life and irritates your corneas and remains like a ripple on the surface of every bone you have.

She autographed her viscera.

Turned herself inside out and confirmed the Truth of Hells.

Found her forehead slick against a window in a room with no sound. Out there on the black street somewhere skyless, three children played. Jumping over puddles of nothing and tossing invisible somethings to each other. Scratching at themselves, distracted from their games, deaf to how Maria opened her mouth and pushed air out weakly. Two were girls: one beat her chest with her own fists, thump thump, and licked her teeth; the other threw her invisible ball up and caught it countless times and around each wrist was a band of angry red. The third child, the boy, kept looking down at himself and laughing this world's noiseless laugh.

For some time they did these things and then all three froze as if in cold pain, and their bodies unzipped, their skin and deeper tissues curling outward, and another Maria stepped out of the ecdysis of each child and also watched this from her clammy position at the window. Her sweat left an oval of grayish slime on the glass.

*Big?*

**hey girl it's okay I'm right here hey Depp stop I think she's**

*I don't wanna do this anymore*

**hey Maria hey don't cry**

*I have to tell you something*