

# inked

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# ONE

Lying in bed, I could still smell the rural town I grew up in. The manure stench of the country combined with fresh-cut grass layered over car exhaust and fresh rain, and I wanted to forget. When I was a girl, I would listen to frogs, insects and a silence that made my ears ring, but it had turned to car horns, screeching tires and drunks walking home at closing time. I lived in Seattle's gray for eleven years, but it had never quite become home. I tried not to think of the place I ran from, the life that existed so many years before, and focused my thoughts on the noise of the city filtering through the cracked window. The thin red lines of the alarm clock illuminated the corners of my bedroom, waiting to usher in the start of another day. I searched for patterns in the shadows painted across my ceiling and tried to will my body into a few more minutes of sleep. I had not slept through the night for as long as I could remember, and my nocturnal routine helped feign a semblance of normality.

When the alarm clock finally announced morning with its blaring greeting, I slammed my hand over the snooze button and continued to watch light take over the dark corners. Fighting my body's desire to remain in the warmth of the bed, I pulled my feet out of the blankets into the early morning air. A few months before, I had picked up a job as a cashier at a second-hand bookstore in the Pike Place Market, and selling used books to tourists and local market rats was easy enough. Wrapping myself in a scarf and hooded sweatshirt, I fought off the cold fog as I traversed the hilly streets to the market smelling of fresh fish and dried flowers.

Each morning, I stopped by a post office box I maintained specifically for communication with my estranged mother. I had a cell phone, but preferred the less personal interaction of letters. I could still feel the intimacy of my mother's handwriting and smell the Shalimar perfume rising off of the lined paper, but I did not have to hear her raspy voice or answer any questions. I could skip awkward sections and ignore inquiries. In keeping my distance I was able to avoid her manipulations and veiled insults, and, even if forced, she had to remain civil and play up motherly concern.

Her letters came in reliable two to three month intervals. She would write at length about her latest crafting projects: quilting, scrapbooks, decoupage, books she had read, the adventures she and my stepfather experienced on nature drives and gossip about family and local business. Through her letters I learned of marriages and births of cousins I would never meet. It was a secret link to my family I would never admit I needed to maintain.

The letters had stopped coming months before, but I checked the box every day anyway. I was

worried, but continued a battle with my stubborn nature. I could not disclose that I needed her. I was the rebellious distant daughter living miles away, and in order to keep my role I could not express concern without showing a crack in the façade I had worked hard to build.

I was the only person in the post office most mornings. I enjoyed the desolate feeling of the abandoned office and the usually crowded clerk windows chained behind a metal gate. Fumbling with my keys, I tried to open the box, and I was surprised at the outline of an envelope as I reached my tattooed hand into the dark abyss of gold lockers.

I read the letter and navigated hilly streets toward the waterfront. My mother's handwriting was shaky and foreign, and I found the words on the page frustrating and disgusting. The pavement under my feet moved and the early-rising members of the city bustled around me, as if I did not exist, but I felt rooted to the ground. She did not write to explain she had breast cancer, osteoporosis, heart disease or anything normal. I would not have been surprised, maybe even expecting something like that, but my mother wrote to explain she had contracted the AIDS virus - the last possible illness I would have expected. According to the letter, she had been HIV positive for years without her own knowledge and in most cases she should have become symptomatic within ten years, but by her own calculation the last time she could have contracted the virus would have been eighteen years prior, shortly before she met and married my stepfather, Edward.

Somehow, in an emotional trance, I ended up at the store, and in the quiet of the early morning shift I was alone for hours. The solitude left me time to read the letter over and over again. Some of her thoughts were remarkably contrived, as if she felt it was easier to spell out her symptoms in medical terms, while other parts showed conflict and confusion with the disease gripping her life. Between mini lectures about my sexual partners and choices of protection, she explained my stepfather was not positive and urged me to be tested. I had never heard my mother say the word "condom" before, but it there it was, scribbled across the page in her perfect script. It all felt like a lie, an after school special for adults, but the letter was too real to be a joke. As she signed off, she begged me to call her.

Cassie, the afternoon girl, arrived half an hour late.

"Afternoon Tori, sorry I'm late, missed the first bus. Has it been busy today?" Out of breath, she pulled a black purse off her shoulder and dropped it behind the register.

"Did you get the inventory of the nature section finished like Jack asked?" She paused and turned my way, "You look terrible, is everything all right?"

Without answering, I gathered my backpack. I was supposed to work two more hours, but I could not have cared less what Jack, the owner, had asked me to do with the disorganized section on hiking and camping. Honestly I had forgotten I was even supposed to work on it.

Jack had never had a problem with my work ethic. I did half the work of Cassie and Stephen, I was scheduled for better hours and left early on most days. Jack liked to schedule me for the morning shift so he could be at home with his wife. I got away with more because Jack only cared that I was sleeping with him, and I am pretty sure Cassie knew it.

"Jack's going to be pissed." She moved towards the hiking and wildlife section of the store, clearly disgusted that I not taken inventory or organized at all.

"Are you leaving?" Cassie's hands were on her curvy hips, and her cropped black hair was a mess from the wind. She was not even trying to hide her annoyance.

“Jack wanted the entire nature section done by the end of the day. I figured you’d be at least half-way through.”

“Sorry, call Stephen in to help you out. I can’t be here today.”

“Whatever Tori, when Jack asks why it didn’t get finished, I’m telling him you didn’t touch it and left early.” She turned and stomped over to the books, pulled them off the shelf and threw them into a pile on the floor.

I left and walked in circles through the city until night fall. If kept moving, my thoughts focused on destinations rather than the letter in my backpack. When night finally seeped into the corners of the city, I headed back to my shared apartment. The entire place smelled like marijuana and pizza cheese, and I ignored my roommate and her boyfriend’s invitation to join them and headed straight to my bed. Fear and disbelief replaced my usual idle thoughts, and my mother’s face haunted my sleep. In my fragments of dreams her lifeless limbs reached out to me in death.

The next morning I called her collect from a pay-phone. The listless sound of my mother’s voice made it sound like she was talking from a cloud high above the receiver. I waited for the Candid Camera crew to jump out from behind the formation of payphones, but no one appeared beside me in the cold morning fog. I listened to her talk, and her tone was not manipulative or angry but was uncharacteristic in its sweetness and concern. Even though she was in pain and felt terrible, I alleviated my own guilt with the thought of my stepfather taking care of her.

“Antonia, the doctors aren’t sure of how much time I have. The virus has been working away at my system for years, a lot longer than most people before they start in on a medication regimen.” She was holding back tears. I could hear it in her voice.

“When can you come home?”

Her pleading was distressing, but I snapped. “I’m not coming home, I have a job and an apartment. I have responsibilities.” I mouthed “I’m sorry,” but the words were inaudible.

“I’ll call you soon, I promise.” I placed the handset back in the receiver with a click.

I had always blamed my mother for my inability to maintain normal, adult relationships. Growing up, my family never touched or hugged. My mother rarely told me she loved me, never hugged me or tucked me in at night. Even after she married my stepfather I never saw her hug or kiss him. Every once in a while I would see them hold hands in the car, my stepfather’s rough, calloused hand would grip the soft skin of my mother’s, and jealousy ripped through me as I watched from the backseat. We lived as three separate entities under one roof with nothing in common, no bond other than DNA and marriage.

Before Edward, the first ten years of my life were spent in line at church food banks augmented by the occasional welfare office visit. When I was five we rented a one-bedroom house from a fragile wheelchair bound woman. I hid behind my mother’s legs as the woman watched from her chair. It seemed there were not a lot of questions asked by adults in my early childhood. Everywhere we went everyone felt sorry for my single mother.

We moved our meager belongings into the cold house, and my mother discovered a note on the refrigerator. The land lady had packed some boxes into the front closet and asked us to leave them until her son-in-law came by with his pick-up truck. After reading the message, my mother stomped over to the closet and began snooping. She pulled out box after box of smelly old lady clothes and chipped dishes, but one

contained food. I had never seen so many blue boxes of macaroni and cheese and cans of soup. My mother instructed me in rushed tones to take almost all of the food and hide it in my bedroom closet. I was nervous as my skinny arms stacked the cans and rattling boxes behind the rusted water heater.

When the woman's son-in-law arrived to pack up the boxes, he smiled widely at my mother with a mouth full of crooked teeth and called me "squirt." I did not want to let go of her leg as she smiled back at him, touching his forearm covered in the same wild auburn hair covering his head. Red crept into my face. I prayed he would not realize our theft as he sifted through the boxes.

My heart raced in my throat as he said, "This box is nearly empty."

"Antonia, why don't you go play in your room?"

Although she asked it as a question, I knew better than to respond in any way but to release her leg and scramble down the hallway. My room was still empty, all of my toys still packed in boxes scattered around the house. Standing in the middle of the four white walls, I felt the food in the back of the closet. I imagined the red haired man could sense its presence too, and I waited, in fear, for him to come rushing into the room to seize it all.

After waiting for minutes in silence, I peeked down the hall. The man was still grinning as my mother led him to the couch. She was speaking in a high, girlish voice and continued to touch his forearm, but her tone changed as it traveled down the narrow hallway.

"Shut your door Antonia."

The food lasted us for weeks.

My mother never verbalized her contempt of our past life, but after she married my stepfather she lived as if it had never happened. Indulgences such as name brand food and meals out at restaurants became habit instead of a luxury. They both drove new cars, and we moved into a big house in a nice neighborhood. She surrounded herself with things to help her forget the years she had no money, and the years she spent moving us out of places overnight as they turned bad and boyfriends suddenly stopped being nice to us.

When I left home, I was optimistic in my new life, and as years passed the slow revelation of my naiveté increased. I continued to try and become the person I wanted to be, rather than continuing to be the person my mother had created. Forced to share her short stature and dark eyes, I wanted to change everything else about who I was becoming.

When I was nineteen, I decided to force drastic progress in my metamorphosis. The process of change moved too slowly, and I wanted to do something radical to push it forward. I elected to change my full name.

I thought I would have to explain the what's and why's of my choice in front of a packed courtroom, but after a painless procedure I was no longer Antonia Olivia Preston. I walked out of the court house, smiling at my victory and clutching the piece of paper that declared my name was now, by law, Tori Liddell. I had my first tattoo, a red star on the back of my right hand, inked the very same day.

It became regular practice to get a new tattoo every time I made a significant personal or lifestyle change. In addition to several more stars, I have colorful fish, hearts, skulls and Celtic patterns covering and circling my hands and arms. Every image has a story and meaning to my personal mythos and is a permanent outward testament to my personal revolution.

After the letter, I did not follow through on my promise to call my mother again, and spring and

summer passed into fall. I stopped checking the post office box. I became bored with Jack and the bookstore job, as I had with so many others in the past. As Jack's interests waned, the Pike Place Market lost its charm, and the tourists started to wear on me. I stopped caring if my sarcastic verbal jabs caused them to storm out of the store.

When I arrived one October morning, Jack waited for me, cleaning up shelves and taking inventory. I knew what was happening before he could try to rationalize it. His thinning brown hair cascaded past his shoulders and bounced off the faded tie-dye shirt. Had it been forty years earlier he would have fit in perfectly at Woodstock.

"Tori, you know I don't want to do this, but sweetheart, I keep getting complaints from customers. My wife keeps getting complaints. I covered your ass more times than I can count with her."

I sneered at his use of the word sweetheart. If I had cared, I would have fought for the job. I would have tried to seduce him into keeping me on the payroll. If I cared, I would have threatened to tell his wife. However, as I watched him wrap his arms over his belly he took on a fatherly quality. I worked the key to the store off of my keyring.

He reached out as I handed it to him.

"I have a few minutes before I have to open the store." His hand still lingered on mine. "Just because I had to fire you doesn't mean we still can't see each other."

For a moment I considered his offer, his touch, but I turned and left.

He yelled after me. "My wife will never believe you, so don't even try it"

I spent the day and several that followed meandering around the Market and all over downtown Seattle. I wandered up to Capitol Hill and as far north as Greenlake. I left my apartment every day at the same time, deceiving my roommate into thinking I still had a job. I knew with the first of the month fast approaching I would not be able to pay my share of the rent. I left the apartment every day living a lie while I avoided the inescapable truth.

I was running out of money quickly. I pulled all of my cash out of my bank account and allowed several purchases to overdraw. My cell phone was useless, the contact list full of ex-boyfriends and scorned lovers. I let it cancel for non-payment. After avoiding it for weeks, I went to close out the post office box.

All I could see of the kid behind the counter was his sandy colored hair as he stared at my colorful hands.

"Yeah, there are two letters for your box, but I have to take the last two months of payment." I never saw the whites of his eyes as he mumbled.

I gave up my copy of the small bronze key and almost all of the money I had left.

I rolled my eyes at my mother's letter, she still addressed all my mail to Antonia Preston even after I explained my name change multitudes of times. The letter was several weeks old, and I pushed feelings of guilt away as she apologized for her lack of contact. The letter was unusually short, only detailing her doctor's visits and medication changes.

The other letter was from my grandmother, the postmark only a few days old. The handwriting was eerily familiar and shared a lot of qualities with my mother's. I could hear the midwestern accent in the words on the page.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you Tori, but your mama couldn't. Eddie died in a car accident." The words

did not mean anything to me. He meant nothing to me. I felt nothing but empty and alone.

My mother was also alone, barely able to care for herself, and my grandmother urged me to go home and take care of her. The tone of the letter was desperate. I stood on the edge of the wet sidewalk as cars passed, gripping the edges of the paper with both my hands. My grandmother signed the letter with her phone number and a heart, just like every birthday card she had ever sent.

I found the nearest payphone and dialed the number.

“Hi Gramma, it’s Tori.” I waited for the confusion and following excitement to wear down.

“Oh, you got my letter. I’m so sorry honey. I’m sorry it had to come like that, no one knew how to get a hold of you. You must be really upset. Eddie was the only father you ever really knew.” Just like my mother, filling the air with their useless words. “Your mama hasn’t really wanted to talk about it, but when I call her she’s been asking after you a lot. She’s so sick, and the only thing that seemed to be getting her through was him. I really think you need to go home. The doctor said I can’t travel or I would go up there and spend some time with her. You need to go grieve with her.”

I did not know what I needed. Standing on the edge of a sidewalk, on the verge of homelessness, I was a girl who could not feel anything. Even as the imminent death of my entire family unfolded before me, I could not imagine or conjure the correct emotions. I was not sad, I was nothing.

“Tori, are you okay? Can you hear me?”

“Sorry, I’m here. Can you buy me a train ticket home?”