

Self Dissection

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Editors' note: This piece contains descriptions of self-harm.

Sometimes I wish I smoked cigarettes. I'd like the rattle of a box in my pocket, the slight outline of rebellion daring to show through my clothes. I'd like the satisfaction of flipping the box top open to reveal a clean array of cigarettes waiting for me inside. I'd like the shape of a lighter, the orange glow on my face as I tilt my head towards the flame. Actually, I think I'd like a whole collection of lighters. One for good days. That one would be red. One for quiet days. Lavender. One for sharing with friends. That one would need a pattern of some kind. And one for just flipping open, simply to stare at that fragile little flame. That one would be antique, a heavy brass lighter with detailed engravings. I'd like the feel of it all, of emulating one of those movie scenes with a teenager leaning against a brick building to light up a smoke in the dark.

But I have to admit, I haven't been completely honest. There is one small detail I've left out, one main reason why I wished I smoked cigarettes.

I'd like to put them out on my skin.

Let me paint a picture for you. A family of five crowds around a computer screen, scrolling through years' worth of photos and home videos dating back to 2004. They laugh as one, howling at close-ups of a child's teary face after her first bee sting, or the sight of a blonde-haired boy

sandwiched between two red circles of construction paper, his homemade m&m Halloween costume. Dinner is cooking in the kitchen. The smell of homegrown rotisserie chicken fills the family's noses and the sound of crackling asparagus on the stove makes its way into the living room.

The mouse clicks. The family lets out a collective "aawww" in response to a photo of two girls swinging their younger brother between them through a pumpkin patch. Click. Gasp. A teenager with braces grins, showing off her cuts and scrapes after sliding 50 feet down a steep rock face. Click. A proud seven-year old boasts her catch, dangling a rainbow trout from a stick. Click. The family is mesmerized by a trio of siblings giving their best performance to Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger," complete with eccentric air guitars. Click. A boy's wide-eyed smile as he holds up his "Mr. Sunshine Award" trophy from preschool graduation.

"Okay, dinner's almost ready," interrupts the fun. The computer screen goes black. The family separates from their tight huddle only to see one of the five's bodies shaking with quiet tears, her face red from stifling her sobs. Nobody had noticed when the laughter of five became the laughter of just four, her giggle slowly fading and smile deepening into a frown. That's me. I'm the girl who can't help but cry looking at old albums. Who can't stand to see her old self, the little girl without a care in the world, the girl who smiled because she wanted to. It's confusing—how did the girl with confidence for

days, the girl in the pictures, turn into the girl who drags razor blades across her skin?

Call me sensitive, call me nostalgic, call me what you want, but before you do, consider what I'm about to say. Then you might understand why I long for the times shown in those photographs.

One. Two. Three. Go. It's like a countdown before the gunshot signaling the start of a race, but with a couple key differences: it's just me, and there is no race. "One" does not mean taking my place on the track. "Two" does not mean putting my foot on the starting block. "Three" does not mean placing my hands on the ground in front of me. "Go" does not mean launching myself forward and powering through to the finish line, riding on a wave of adrenaline. No, for the entirety of my senior year of high school, "one, two, three, go" meant something entirely different. One: tug my clothes to reveal bare skin. Two: rest a piece of cold, thin, sharp metal on that skin. Three: inhale. Go: swipe the blade across the skin. Bask in the surge of adrenaline that follows.

Exhale. Much better. Then I tuck the open gash in my skin back beneath my clothing, relishing the sting of my body begging that I take better care of it.

My phone buzzes, I pick it up. Olivia's wondering if I want to eat lunch outside today! I do, I tell her. I put my notebooks and papers for the afternoon's classes into my backpack and slip into shoes. My roommate Margot comes in just as I swing my backpack on. "Lunch outside with Olivia?" I invite her. She happily joins. We walk down the dorm hallway painted a questionable salmon color, chatting about our days. Margot got a package in the mail, I dissected the digestive system of a shark, Margot was paired with a questionable partner in math, I saw Dr. Kelly's fly down for the third time. We wave at the freshman girls walking back to their rooms and nag them about keeping

their masks on, there's a Covid case on campus. Down the stairs, Olivia waits for us outside. She had a free period first thing in the morning, aced a computer science quiz, and yelled at the sophomore couples to just get off of each other for once. At the dining hall, we discover that lunch today is subpar. It's "healthy chicken" (whatever that means) with rice and broccoli. At least dessert is good. We stock up on Cheryl's famous chocolate chip cookies that only come around once every couple weeks. The grass outside is dry and we're all wearing pants. What's there to complain about? We sit in a small circle that slowly grows as others join us, they're also excited about Cheryl's baking today. The sun is warm but not too warm, bright but not hurting our eyes, and all is well. I laugh. I smile. I'm a good friend. I do my homework. I call my parents. I text my siblings. I am fine.

Life resumes for me. Not a single splash, not even a ripple on the surface.

It's 12:45 on a Tuesday. The room reeks of fish, accompanied by the faint scent of latex. My hair is tied back, my lab coat hangs by my knees, and my class ring bulges beneath my blue elastic gloves. The air buzzes with chatter, filled with both disgusted and excited voices as we begin dissection #6: The brain. Our sharks lie flat on the lab benches, an array of tools lined up beside them. An arsenal of backup probes, pins, scissors, and scalpels sit in a tray just behind my shark. How convenient for me and my lab partner, Selah.

Selah holds our scalpel and makes the first incision, a deep one. We both grin. She switches to scissors to snip through the soft cartilage of the skull. It crunches between the blades, and Selah turns to see my reaction, curious if I am also eager about the grand reveal of the brain. But I'm no longer watching our shark. My attention has shifted eighteen inches forward to the tool tray. More specifically, the scalpel section. My refusal to look at

the shark strikes Selah as queasiness. After all, this class does follow lunch. “I can finish this part,” she volunteers. I nod, barely registering her words. She continues, only to be interrupted by Nathaniel, who wants to see if we can show him how to get started. Selah follows him to his bench, leaving me alone with the shark. And the scalpels.

And now there’s one in my hand. The cool, clean metal is dense. It feels good in my grasp. I run my fingernail through the cross-hatched lines etched into its handle. I look for a spare alcohol swab to sterilize it before bringing it with me out of the classroom and into the bathroom. Found one. I flip the scalpel in my hand to slide it up into my sleeve. “Yeah, you should do the next cut,” Selah says. She’s returned from helping Nathaniel. The scalpel falls back into my palm, lying horizontally like it’s supposed to.

My previously calm surface had started to ripple. I used to be able to sway in the surf, jumping over waves and landing with my toes in the sand, safe on the other side. I could keep myself afloat, my head bobbing in the water without going under. But it didn’t take long for the sky to darken and the water to turn choppy. Waves rose on the surface, high enough that I could no longer ignore them. They were too tall to jump over and too big to dive through. They left me paralyzed, standing in place as the tide pulled the water out from beneath me. My toes remained in the sand, burrowing down while I braced for impact and stared straight into the heart of the wave that towered over me. My staredown was short-lived. The water crashed on top of me, directly on top of me, pinning me down against the ocean floor, helpless against its weight. I tumbled blindly, waiting for the tumultuous ride to end so I could have a breath.

But I was breathing! To everyone else, I was sunbathing on the beach, dry on a towel with a book in my hand. It was as if there were two of me. One was drowning in sandy water, screaming only to

realize that she hadn’t made a sound, only bubbles. The other was with everyone else on the beach, raving about Cheryl’s chocolate chip cookies. She had held up a billboard saying, “I’m fine!” in front of their faces, effectively blocking everyone’s view of the disaster happening in the ocean.

Selah had unknowingly plucked me from the water and given me a birds-eye view of my battle against the waves. The battle I was destined to lose. Then I knew that life could not resume as usual. Selah is the one who told me that I wasn’t fine. I put the billboard away and showed my friends and family the other girl, the one in the waves. The day after dissection #6 marks the day I asked for help.

I don’t think about cigarettes as often anymore, and I no longer keep a set of razor blades stashed in my closet. But catch me looking at photos of my younger self, and you can bet I’ll be blinking back tears. I can’t help but feel like I’ve let down the little girl in the pictures. I let her down, I disappointed her, I failed her. Then I remember that growing up is painful. The scars that decorate my skin are growing pains, simple as stretch marks. Sure, they’ll stick with me for the rest of my life, but they serve as a reminder of what I can endure. And that’s something my younger self should be proud of.