

The Dagger

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Please note, this work includes content related to sexual assault, violence, and blood.

The daughter peers over her shoulder at her reflection in the rotting mirror. She sweeps her hair over the opposite shoulder and watches her spine undulate with the movement. About seven vertebrae down her naked back rests the leather-wrapped hilt of a small dagger. The blade runs five inches deep and stays lodged within her spine. As a child, she paid little mind to the blade. It was shorter than and rarely painful. She could run through amber fields and climb up ancient trees, all without feeling the blade in her back.

The first time she truly acknowledged the dagger was a few days after her eleventh birthday. It was a morning like any other, waking to the light of dawn creeping through her window. But as she rose from her cotton sheets, she noticed a large red stain at the center of the mattress. Looking down at her linen nightgown, she found another red stain. She let out a scream that startled the crows outside and sent her mother running up the old steps. The mother burst into the bedroom, a force of adrenaline and fear, and instantly relaxed at the sight of the bloody bedding. She took the daughter into her arms, wrapping them both in her woolen, maroon house coat, and chuckled. "It's alright, darling. This is just part of growing up. You're a woman now." This was the first time the daughter felt the dagger in her back twist.

Over time, the presence of the dagger becomes harder for the daughter to ignore. At school, teachers

call on boys to answer questions, even when the girls have their hands raised. At the bank, a woman asks to withdraw money from her account and is told to come back with her husband. At the university, young men prepare for their careers while their sisters wash dishes at home. At the clinic, a young girl screams—a child giving birth to a child. With each of these calamities, the daughter's dagger plunges a little deeper. Suddenly, the dagger and its pain are constant. She continues as she always has—waking up, dressing, preparing breakfast for her father, going to work in the town, coming home to help with dinner, washing the dishes, folding the laundry, and going to bed. But now, she does these tasks with an ever-present awareness of the blade lodged in her back. They become one.

The sun begins to set over the shingled roofs that outline the town square. Inside the fabric shop, the daughter counts change from the till. The shop owner's son crouches in the middle of the shop, fixing a loose floorboard. As the light coming through the display windows wanes, he stands up and turns to the daughter. "It's getting dark. Probably time to lock up. Can I walk you home?" The daughter agrees, grateful for his chivalry, and follows him out of the shop, locking its door behind them.

It's a twenty-minute walk from the shop to the daughter's home, through town and into the farmland. They walk in silence and a few feet apart,

first along the cobblestone path that winds between storefronts and then on the dirt path that cuts through towering stalks of corn. Suddenly, about a mile from home, he grabs the daughter by her wrist and yanks her to the ground. Using the weight of his body, he pins her face into the dirt. With one hand on the back of her head, the other pulls loose the buttons of her dress resting at her neck. She doesn't scream—she knows no one will hear her. Small pebbles in the dirt path indent her skin, weighed down by two people. He exposes her back to him, grabs the hilt of the dagger, and twists.

For a week, the daughter refuses to leave her bedroom, and the mother frets. The mother brings her stew and bread each morning and collects the uneaten meal each night. At noon, she dabs a warm cloth at the skin around the daughter's dagger, crusted with black blood. Sometimes, the mother creeps into the daughter's room and crouches at the side of her bed. She gently strokes the daughter's cheek while roughly wiping a tear from her own face. "I would take the pain from you if I could," she whispers into the stagnant night air.

The next morning, the mother brings breakfast to her daughter's bedroom once again. She places the tray on the nightstand and opens the curtains. Standing in front of the daughter's bed, the mother slides the thick house coat off her shoulders and lets it pool around her feet, nude in the morning sun. "I can't see you in pain anymore," she whispers to the daughter. In one swift movement, she pulls

the dagger out from the daughter's back, takes it behind her body and plunges it into her own flesh. The mother grimaces, then smiles. "There," she says to the daughter. "You don't need to worry about that dagger anymore." She stands facing her daughter, the coat at her feet, with blood gently trickling down the back of her legs and onto the thick wool. The mother's slight body casts a shadow behind her on the bedroom wall, at first a blurred outline of squared shoulders and rounded hips. But as the mother turns to leave the room, the shadow's edges sharpen, and a jagged line of spikes appears where the smooth curve of a spine should be. The daughter looks in horror at her mother's back, marred by about a dozen daggers of different sizes and metals, each crusting with shades of crimson. The most vibrant blood trickles from the new dagger at the base of her spine. The daughter now understands why the mother was always wearing that house coat. It wasn't to keep warm or to remain modest, it was to hide the myriad of blades lodged in her own back. And for the sake of her daughter, she had just plunged in another.

The daughter stands to go after her mother but feels a familiar pain in her back. Slowly approaching the mirror, she turns to reveal a new, larger dagger lodged in the same place the old one used to be. She grabs a cardigan from her closet and dons it over her shoulders, the new hilt tenting the knit behind her, and follows her mother into the kitchen to prepare dinner.