

# A Bone to Pick

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The boys played games in the back of the butcher shop. Blackjack, poker, it didn't matter. They all ended the same, with their own urbanized version of Russian roulette. I was fresh out of the army then, a field medic of all things. I was 95 pounds and in basic training a week after my high school graduation. Got my degree. Did a tour in Desert Storm. Cut into the wounded with a cigarette hanging out of my mouth. When that couldn't do it for me anymore, I started counting during surgery. I remember this one guy, Bishop from Fayetteville, got carried in with his left arm turned inside out but the bone, by the grace of God if you ask him, still intact. I counted all the way to 16,752 on that one. I always took the first two beats to breathe and cut into the skin on three. I never got used to the feeling of my knife slicing into their flesh. Didn't matter after Khafji, anyway. I took a bad fall, messed up my hip, and that was it.

I sat at home with my dad through the spring. Drank beer. Watched golf on TV. He didn't ask me for war stories and I didn't offer any up. I was twenty-five years old and burnt. Hobbled around the house. Sucked on snack cakes and Aunt Chrissy's cobbler until one May day when I pinched at my waist and found a new layer of fat.

"What are you doing?" My dad asked when he found me lying face-down, cursing at the floor.

"Planks," I muttered through my teeth.

"Jen," my dad huffed. "This ain't doing nothing." I collapsed.

"It was doing something!" I protested, trying to find comfort in pulling my knees to my chest. I tugged on my shins, wanting so badly to reign them in. My hip locked, blocking its path. One leg fell lopsided on the floor, the other touched my chest. The walls of my room were still the same Tiffany blue that my dad had painted them when we first moved to Staten Island twelve years ago. He said New York was a city of islands so I asked for the room downstairs, my Tropic of Cancer. A gallon bucket of paint had sat on the floor since my return, collecting dust, reminding me of the reality of what Staten Island actually was; slate grey, minus the sparkle. There it all sat in the corner, so unbothered by itself. A gallon of grey paint. Me and trips to the V.A. and gas station down the street and all of Staten Island for that matter sealed inside of it.

"My buddy, Louis, you remember Louis, don't ya'?" I shook my head no. "Oh, come on, Uncle Louis? With the, the uh, the red leather jacket he always had on and that son of his, Nico?"

"Dad," I spoke, half asking him to stop this train before it got to wherever it was going.

“He owns the deli on Adele?” My dad tried one last time. I knew the one. “Well anyways, baby, he needs a cashier. Said the job’s yours if you want it.”

“I don’t know if-” I retorted.

“He’s got a stool all ready for ya’. No standing required.” A man conscious of the hip.

“Okay, sure.” I agreed and became all the worse off for it.

When I walked in the backdoor of the deli at 4 a.m., I sneezed. It was cold and reeked of carcass. Peppercorn littered the countertops. No standing became two hours of nothing but standing real quick when Nico handed me a spray bottle of bleach and rag and told me they opened at six.

So I cleaned. I scrubbed and washed and turned my back when I heard Nico and his five friends shouting slurs at one another while gathered around a folding white table. They were all drunk off their asses, throwing Jokers to the stain-splattered floor. They hadn’t just started either, at 4 a.m. they were deep into two bottles of vodka.

“Fuck you and fuck your mother,” I heard one of them yell, slamming his hand down. “It’s not going to be me tonight, boys.” It felt like the army again. The boys looking for a rise and me refusing to give it. I mopped with more vigor. Pretended a sergeant was looking over my shoulder. I scrubbed grease off the walls that looked older than me. The floors were cream-colored after but not before. Fifteen minutes from open and my stool. That’s when I heard them flip the meat grinder on.

“You don’t bet with money when you work at a deli and nobody shoots a gun in New York without somebody else around to hear it,” Nico told me when he noticed me peeking. Like that explained it.

“It’s now or never, Michael,” Nico warned.

“Lose your hand and you might lose another,” one boy teased, nudging Michael closer to the machine. Michael closed his eyes, bit his lip, and screamed, “now!” right before jamming his hand in the meat grinder. Nico pulled the plug and Michael’s hand returned in one piece.

“Maybe next time, Mikey,” another boy joked. I leapt, the medic in me wanting to inspect the hand that had somehow escaped the claws of death unharmed.

“Jenny, you tryna’ be our virgin sacrifice or something?” Nico asked and the boys laughed, and I thought about it. That rush-hour savior that I used to be really thought about it, and when the rational, ‘doing planks in my bedroom alone is enough thrill for me’ part of me jumped out and tried to resist, I gave her and the boys and the rest of Staten Island the finger.

Show off. Girl with a grudge. A bone to pick. Nothing but carcasses came through the back door of the deli. The belly of a pig swung by my face and I dared it to spill its guts.

“Alright, Jenny,” they whooped and hollered from behind. Nico stood with plug in hand, ready to yank, the meat grinder rumbled on.

“One, two,” and I thrust my hand forward. A chorus of "holy cows" could be heard from behind me but I was the cold cut. I was the mangled meat, wounded soldier, wrist-deep in a mess of my own making.

“Three,” and I cut myself free with a butcher’s knife as the boys watched, mouths wide. I stood up tall and saw the cream floor beneath me turn red, heard someone say “lock the door.” I’ve cut to the bone before. It was nothing new, not really. I performed my own autopsy and lived to tell. Cause of death: who cares, ask the V.A.

I came home from the hospital a week later, all bandaged up and fixed by doctors who found a life in medicine more stable than I ever could. My dad didn’t ask me why I did it, just if it hurt and by how much.

My first night home, I woke up sweating but silent, like after so many nights in the desert I had forgotten how to scream. It was summer in New York, hot and stuffy. More uncomfortable, harder to ignore than the desert’s dried-lips kiss.

'I had lost my hand without ever even playing the game,' I thought to myself. My room was too small. Too optimistic. Opening the windows just meant letting this city win. Again, I picked up a knife, felt its familiar blade. Glorified it, lied to it, hated it. Used it. Slashed open that can of grey paint. Tore down my posters of the Everglades and coral reefs that I would never see. Took my one good hand and painted all through the night. Became the begging city bird Staten Island always knew me to be, hungry for a taste of something carnivorous.