



SAD TOMATO

A Love Story

The first time he cut her, she felt the endorphins rush her head and she thought, just for a moment, that she was going to die. It felt so fucking good. The blade sliced a clean, straight line above her ankle, and the blood held back until her heart beat again. It came first in a trickle and then a pour. He handled the knife like he was born to do it, the tip of his wet tongue hanging from his mouth as his eyes, immovable, focused on the target and the line. She looked at him and she wanted him so bad, and after he cut himself, too, she had him. She rode him until they collapsed together into the drying blood that stained the sheets. She didn't wake up until after noon, and then the metallic smell of what they had done with the knife turned her on all over again, so she woke him.

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The second time he cut her, she wanted it to be the same as before, and she acted as though it was, but something had gone missing. The rapt attention that had turned her cotton underwear wet the first time couldn't be found on his face this time. He cut a jagged edge into the fleshy area near the turn of her elbow, and it hurt. She suppressed the whimper, because she feared that he wouldn't love her anymore if he didn't think she was tough, and if he didn't love her anymore, then he should just keep cutting until there was nothing left. After he was done, she opened herself to him again, but he fell asleep without finishing. She lay awake, his snoring head on her chest, and she licked away the blood.

The third time he cut her, she was asleep, and when the knife's edge slipped below the surface of her calf, she bolted from bed. "What are you doing?" she screamed. He looked back at her with empty eyes and said, "You like this."

"Not this way," she said. He told her that she was a bitch and a whore, and he left into the night and the cold. She cried off and on until morning, when exhaustion finally overtook her, because she was sure he didn't love her anymore. When she awoke, she cut both calves and prayed that he might accept her sacrifice.

The fourth time he cut her, she no longer cared. People she had never met came in and out of their place at all hours, and she was sampling the goods they carried, though that was mostly to please him. She didn't like the stuff, and sometimes she would fool him by feigning as if she were going to partake, and then she would stop when he looked away. All the while, he was falling further and further from her. She could see him, if she focused hard, but he wasn't really there. She offered an arm and hoped that he might find his way back. He nicked her with the knife and left with a friend, and she hardly bled at all.

The fifth time he cut her, she had something she needed to say. He hadn't noticed that she was gone during the day now, that she had gotten her hair fixed, that she was putting on makeup, that she was staying out of the contraband moving through their tenement. He hadn't noticed that she was eating healthily—which is to say that she was eating at all—or that she was working and putting money away.

He didn't know about the letter she had written to herself and to the one who was growing inside her. She promised herself, and her still-gestating child, that she would be a better, happier person. She would be a mother. A real one.

So when she told him that he was to be a father and he came apart and said she would have to end it, she cut him. She pulled a steak knife from the kitchen drawer and plunged it into his chest, and though it broke her heart to see him writhe and fall to the floor, it was the only way. In his final moments, his throes receding now, a bloody bubble emerged from his nostrils and popped, and she winced. His chest poured forth in a gusher, spreading through his shirt and cascading to the floor, and she just watched. If he wasn't going to love her, and the one who was growing inside of her, he couldn't stay.

When his fight ended—he was valiant, she thought, and that only made her sad because it reminded her of why she loved him—a pale face and sunken eyes stared back at her. Those glassy eyes spooked her, and she felt herself go cold to see him there without seeing him at all. She curled up on the couch and snuggled her head into the cushions, and she could smell him, the man she loved. She closed her eyes, smiled and went to sleep.

Two dreams came to her.

In the first, she walked hand in hand with a child across a snowy plain. The boy was small and took small steps, and her own movements through the stubble field were brief and light, as she stepped in rhythm with him. Finally, the boy looked up, and she saw his father in his face.

"How far, Mommy?"

She smiled at the boy.

"We're almost there."

In the second, the field remained, but the boy was gone. Ahead of her, a hundred yards or more, her mother walked. She called out to the woman, who walked without turning back.

"Mother, please," she yelled.

Nothing.

She woke up.

In the night, a crevasse had opened in the floor, taking him farther away, but she could still see him. He was drained of color. The dried blood on his shirt had turned black.

"I love you," she said.

He said nothing. She wondered if, wherever he had gone, he understood why it had to be this way.

The coming and going of night and day seemed trivial. She slept when sleep called for her, and in her waking hours, she sat on the floor, her back against the couch, and she watched him. The clock on the wall kept the time, but she never knew what side of the day she was on. That first night, she had pulled the blinds and turned off the lights. A 40-watt bulb in her reading lamp cut through the darkness and found a way to him. The glint in his eye was gone for good now, as was he. She held the knife, his blood gone dry on the blade.

Always she held the knife.

The knock on the door folded itself into her dream at first, and then, more insistently, it pulled her from sleep.

"Alyssa. Alyssa, please!"

Her mother.

She held her breath, and she looked across the canyon to her love.

Please be quiet, she wished. Please don't let her in.

The knocks came again, frantic.

She closed her eyes.

"Alyssa!"

She prayed.

She heard her mother turn and scurry down the outside stairs.

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Thank you," she said.

When the next knock came, some time later, she didn't flinch. Their love had gone sour, and the stench filled the room and the canyon between them. Cajolery didn't draw her out, and neither did threats. When she was sure they would be coming through the door and would find him there, she walked to the edge of the canyon that had split across the floor between them and dropped the knife to the bottom of it. It would be their secret. Nobody had to know that he didn't love her anymore.