

Sand Dollars

by Karen Eileen Sikola

Jasmine's words are not heard, but seen, in a tiny window on my laptop. I'm sitting at the head of the table inside the home I'm renting in an expatriate's paradise known as San Miguel de Allende. She asks if I have tattoos, and I feel ashamed to admit my blank skin, recalling the colors of her own.

"Life is on life's terms," she told me once. Her arm, wrapped in clear cellophane, was freshly adorned with a green-pigmented sand-dollar: a living shell.

"You're sexy without them," she tells me now, and I envision myself tracing the outline of each of hers, becoming acquainted with the sparrows along her neckline, just above an ample chest she attempts to conceal in boy shirts, the memorial scrawl at her wrist, to be kissed before placing its attached hand beneath my bare hip bones, the ones that would be inked with an hourglass, and a Celtic Tree of Life, had I the courage.

His tattoos are the first thing I notice about him, though it soon becomes clear that we are both escaping something, and like him, I choose not to speak of it. Where I'm staying, the bed is far too big for just my small frame, but I have no intentions of finding someone here to fill the void.

On the third day in July, he stands next to me, puts his arm around me for a photo. He watches me dance, blow out candles, and spill wine on the teal of my birthday dress. I let it swish on the makeshift dance floor of our Mexican courtyard, leaving a trail of snuffed votive candles in my wake. My legs need to be shaved and I'm still thinking about Jasmine, but the brush of new cotton over my knee caps reassures me that for tonight, at least, I am happy.

"I was doing better when you were in jeans," he says, a longing furrowed just below a borrowed pink bandana he later uses to shield my eyes from a candy-filled piñata.

"Stop," I tell him. "I'm tired."

Available online at [«http://fictionaut.com/stories/karen-eileen-sikola/sand-dollars»](http://fictionaut.com/stories/karen-eileen-sikola/sand-dollars)

Copyright © 2011 Karen Eileen Sikola. All rights reserved.

And I am. Exhausted from the unspoken weight of what we each fled and the effort with which I keep attempting to hold it against him, to keep myself from tracing the knots on his arms, to keep him from unraveling the ones inside me.

He calls me “Granger,” as in Hermione, and I take to the nickname, appreciative of the endearment. But I soon hypothesize that he uses it because my real name rhymes with the one whose doubting lips he left back home, the mere addition of a consonant insufficient in setting me apart, and he is fearful of any reminder, even a strip of her natural brown slipping through the fiction of my highlights.

He tells me she doesn't like his tattoos, and I imagine her tugging on his shirt sleeves to conceal them without acknowledging the gesture, continuing her conversation with a friend about whether Manson's female followers should be released from prison, or if Obama was out of line by calling a cop's actions “stupid,” or if white men getting tattooed with Japanese characters is culturally insensitive.

I imagine him taking it, finding it easier to just appreciate her knowledge of current affairs, the ease with which she can throw out an insult while still making it appear relevant. I kiss the freckle on his bottom lip, trace the ink at his wrists with my fingers.

I am afraid of needles. I don't even know my blood type. Perhaps that's why I find myself so drawn to those with an ability to let their seams publicly show, people who endure physical pain as a means of expressing something internal.

Like writing, a tattoo aims to capture the essence of truth through both simplicity and symbolism. It escapes me, then, how a woman can dislike a cross on the arm of a man she supposedly loves if he put it there in memory of his father, or how we can scoff at the permanence of a person's name under a shirt sleeve.

My brother is right when he warns that tattoos can be an all-too-expressive expression of the limits of our mortality, but he is also

right when he says that temporality is a bitch, so I applaud the fearlessness of allowing another to leave his or her mark on you.

Tattoos are like scars, memories of the flesh. I'd often kiss the red, slug-like keloid on an ex-boyfriend's arm to remind him of my presence, to soothe where self-hatred once guided a bread knife across his skin. I wanted to caress the "Paula" pulsing across Jasmine's tendons as an acknowledgment of a name other than my own. And I wanted to sleep beneath a Celtic cross, in the shelter of my heritage, to feel close to a man who, for once, made my bare body feel worth something.

I'd been back from Mexico a month when I decided to go through with it, to prove to myself I was capable of controlling the trauma, that I was strong enough to endure an hour of needles digging into my side, shading the cage protecting my vital organs.

Two weeks before, I was tested for syphilis, herpes, and HIV, three separate pokes for three separate vials of blood so dark and thick it looked blacker than red. I wanted to know that nothing had been contracted in a backseat, or on an abandoned playground, but I also wanted to feel as *pure* as my name implies. I wanted reassurance that I was eligible for a healthy intimate relationship. I wanted a test to confirm that I wasn't a slut, a result to tell me I was worthy of being loved. And yet I went alone, to prove being loved wasn't necessary.

I popped a Vicodin before lying down on the Saran-wrapped patent-leather body table.

"You've done this before, right?" asked the artist, while placing the five inch outline of a hand-drawn hourglass on the left side of my ribcage. It stretched from my bra line to the two moles that grace the contour of my waist.

"Nope," I replied.

"And you know this is kind of a rough spot, right?" he said, preparing me for the pain he would soon inflict.

"Yep," I said, turning away from the bottle on his neck, a banner below it reading *PICK YOUR POISON*.

My eyes closed when I heard the initial sound of the gun, the buzzing when it hit the first layers of skin as if filling a cavity.

"You're doing really well," he said, wiping away ink and blood with the cold of a wet towel.

I felt like a leather couch being gutted with a dull blade, the victim of a search warrant on some episode of *Law and Order: SVU*. But I gritted my teeth, found support in the stability of a stranger's hand as he carved away at me, the pain of everything else seeping through the shallow slits.

"Did you want the shading in black, too?" the tattooist asked after completing the outline of a vessel filled with equal parts sand.

"Just black," I said.

It felt false to use color. The waiting is in greyscale.

