

Ova

When I'd lay me down to sleep at night, my arms were always causing me trouble. I'd wrap the long and lanky things around myself, across my boobs, and try and get some relief from the pain. I couldn't stretch them out in front of me, as there wasn't any room, so I'd wrap my left arm across my front and reach the right up to the hollow between my shoulder and my head. In the morning, if I did get me any sleep, I'd wake up hugging myself so hard, with my wrist weighted onto my neck so heavy, it almost cut off the blood flow.

Laying on my right side, facing him, would be the only way I could get settled and soothe the ache. With my left shoulder so bad, I couldn't lay on that side, and laying flat on my back for more than two minutes pained me, too. Making sure not to touch him, I'd have to shift positions slow and easy. I'd slide my left arm down along my hip like a weasel on the prowl and pull my right hand, grabbing ahold of the cold sheet, up under my chin. But then I'd feel too bare, so I'd slowly wrap my left arm across my chest again.

He'd hate it when I'd fidget. I'd have to lay right still, or he'd wake up and give me the back of his hand. It's hard to fall asleep when you're trying to lay frozen like a statue. If I'd feel an urge to scratch my forehead or flex my toes to keep them from a cramp, I'd lay there and try to talk myself out of it. If the itch was too bad, I might slowly move my arm up just so, careful that my hand grazing the sheet wouldn't make a sound.

Sometimes I'd hanker to fold my right arm up under the pillow to cushion my head, but the right shoulder wouldn't let me. Not since the day he yanked that one pretty bad, too. "I'll teach you a thing or two about life," he said, and kept at it while I screamed and begged for mercy.

He thought he could make me understand his way was the right way, but the only thing he did teach me about life is how you have to be real careful about who you take to your bed. Not a man who charms and teases till he gets what he wants, along with a place to live, and then later, when things don't go his way, decides to get mean.

But the day he wrenched my right shoulder was the last time I cried. I vowed not to let him see me desperate again. I stayed out of his way and kept my silence. I went about my business and he went about his. No begging any more, no pleading. No yelling and demanding he get out of my house. And no more praying either, because it wasn't getting me any help.

Both shoulders still don't act right, which means I can't do a lot of the chores I used to. Can't even reach up to pull things out of the kitchen cupboards. "Get me that bag of chips up there," he'd say. I'd stare at him, my arms folded, and he'd smirk as he plucked the package off the shelf.

So at night I'd just lay there and try to be still and ignore the burning ache along both arms and up my neck. I'd wonder if death wouldn't be better than this. I'd listen to the clock as the hours dragged on and wait for the wail of the four o'clock train. Then, just as I'd be sliding off to that dark place where farfetched images come to me and pull me into sleep, his snorts would startle me awake. And I'd be stuck with the smell of his oily scalp till the morning light grayed up the windowpane.

Later, when he'd gone off to mow his lawns all day, I'd head out to feed my sweet girls. Henrietta, Jolie, Claudine, and Darla. Sleek, soft, and content to eat scraps and lay me their beautiful brown eggs, those birds have been keeping me sane and holding me on this farm through all of it. Climbing the wooden

ladder, I slip my hand up under Jolie's soft tan feather breast and feel for that warm oval she's produced for me. I roll my fingers over the nubby shell and draw it from her. Then I lift her from her nest box and tuck her delicate body—just bones and feathers—under my arm, stroke her and thank her for her goodness. Soon Claudine sets up a ruckus and I do the same with her and the other two. If he'd known how much I prize those birds, he'd have wrung their necks. So I kept my love hidden away.

He was sore about the kid. I know that. It was the only thing that ever brought a joyous look to his face, thinking about that little bean inside me growing to become a person who would look like him and follow his ways. But when I started to bleed so heavy that dark afternoon, he went white, and by the time we reached the emergency, he was silent. Never spoke a word the next day or the next. Never talked about it, just scowled at me every chance he could.

I expect it was my fault, drinking on the sly—every day pulling the vodka and cigarettes from under the kitchen sink. After I'd done my chores, I'd sit on the porch and drink—and dream of the day I'd be free.

Now I lay here and listen to the tires of his pick-up bumping along the gravel drive for the last time. I stretch out my arms and my naked legs; the tucked-in corners of the sheets hug my feet. The bed belongs to me now, since he jammed all his crap into boxes and plastic bags and said, "I'm not gonna waste my time around here anymore." He's finally found someone else that'll give him what he wants, along with a pretty little house in town. Which brings a smile to my lips. It was a blessing the day I met that gal looking for a renter and a beau.

The shoulder pain folds me back up, and I roll onto my right side. I stretch my arms out in front of me like I could never do when he was here, but the sheets are cold. So I wrap my arms around myself, cuddling my body like I was a baby, and soon my right wrist will drape onto my neck until I can feel a pulse.