

Avery Morris

The Weakness in Me

I sat at the table in the darkness, worrying over the many thoughts that afflicted my mind. The throbbing ache that never went away; the restlessness that never let me sleep.

Why did I feel like this?

Why, of every sin God could have allowed me struggle with, did it have to be this?

A rectangle of light invaded the dimness through a window in the door where the hallway fluorescents penetrated my privacy. I could make out that the orange walls of the unused Sunday School room I'd snuck into were mostly bare. There was a small bulletin board under the dark window, long forgotten. It had several small pits in it where chunks of cork were missing and bore an assortment of tacks that had been arranged to spell "HI." I studied the tacked greeting.

The first time I thought about a woman *like that*, I was thirteen. She was in her early twenties. I was confused by what I felt, knowing only that it was somehow innately wrong. I knew it deeply and fiercely.

Women weren't supposed to think about other women like that.

I forced those thoughts into a box and tried to ignore them. For more than a decade I stayed anchored in religious canon, and I denied the existence of my secret, holding onto the cross with two begging hands. If I prayed hard enough, ignored my desires long enough, they would go away. I would be normal.

Only they didn't, and I wasn't.

No matter how I prayed, God would not take the thorn from my side.

That night in the church, I smiled at Jacqui Hein when I passed her in the hallway. My cheeks burned when I tried to say hello and found my mouth full of my tongue. I swallowed, but it remained stubbornly swollen and useless behind my teeth. It was always like that. I couldn't even think about her without some organ or another forcing its way into my throat. And hard on the heels of this anatomical anomaly was an acid wash of faith-induced self-loathing. Wanting Jacqui, her mouth, her body, was just like every other woman I'd tried not to be attracted to. She was just like every other straight woman who would never want me back.

The sweet smell of her yellow hair followed me into the Sunday School room. Outside the room I heard children calling to one another; their voices clinging to the walls and ceiling like smoke. I picked a hangnail until it bled, a tiny red bead that I sucked into my mouth like a child. I inspected the "HI" more closely.

At thirteen, learning to compress rogue thoughts into their newly assigned casket, I often fantasized about killing myself. The idea was so appealing at times that I would pick out a knife from the kitchen drawer and press it to my wrist to test its sharpness. Or I would hold a handful of pills in my palm while watching my reflection in the bathroom mirror to see what I would do. Always it looked back at me with an expression that was both a plea and a dare. *Do it. Please, don't do it.* I berated myself after each aborted attempt, and the shame adhered itself to my subconscious memory firmly and mercilessly.

Sitting in the orange room, I didn't want to die. But I was tired of the constant guilt that infected my conscience, the exigent hunger of these attractions. The thought of living like that for the rest of my life was overwhelming. The "HI" glared at me as clearly as my adolescent reflection, but this time it was neither a dare nor a plea. Rather it was a demand for action and a promise of relief.

The tack I plucked from the bulletin board was elementary school yellow, an unnatural color meant for crayons and school buses. It was smooth between my thumb and index finger with a fine, rough seam where the plastic had been fused together in the factory. The top of the "I" was now shorter than the "H."

At the table I rolled the tack in my fingers. My pulse was a drum cadence in my ears. My tongue, swollen once again, felt dry and sticky. *Don't*, it tried to say.

I picked out the faint blue vein on my left wrist and began tracing it with the prick of the dull tack. A short line of darkening red slowly emerged as I dragged it again and again across the flesh. The scar it created is no wider than a pencil line, but at the time, the wound felt like a chasm.

No scar begins white. First it is the crusted black night of dried blood, the ring of broken red hide. Then purple and pink before the raised, shiny white of healed epidermis. The process can take years. Some people think scars are beautiful, that they say, "I survived." But this, no, this was not survival. This was my weakness, the times I gave in; the times I couldn't breathe. They mark the nights when I could not carry my own burden, instead forcing it onto my skin, like a vampire sucking their own blood.

The first razorblade I bought was a utility knife. I went to Wal-Mart on a Sunday night, four days after the incident with the thumbtack, and found what I was looking for in the tool aisle. The handle was smooth, cold metal that fit in my hand like it was made for me—a pocket size weapon of mass destruction.

I paid for it and returned, hands shaking, to my cold car.

Still in the parking lot, I shrugged out of my coat and rolled up my left sleeve to my shoulder. I shivered.

With a smooth movement of my thumb, I locked the blade into place.

A deep breath.

Press firmly.

Steady execution.

A weak red line.

I carved out my disgust, my contempt with increasing malevolence. Teeth clenched. An exhale with each slide of the knife.

The pain was a high I can never forget.

Whenever I look at the scars that litter my arm, I am irrepressibly reminded of that time in my life. And I can't help but feel pity for my lonely, tormented, twenty-something-year old self. All that pain, drowning in guilt and shame, a plight so severe that it drove me to punish myself. And for what? Because I believed falling in love with her was an unforgiveable sin.

I wish I could write an ending to this story, but the truth is that there isn't one. Although I may love a woman, I am not free to be with her. Somewhere along the line I made the choice to marry a man, and we started a family together. I'm not unhappy, but I am incomplete. An integral corner of myself remains empty. And so I find the razorblade lurking in the periphery of my life, waiting for the moments I am weakest, when I stare too long into that void, to offer its services.

Sometimes I accept.

