

blade silver

color me scarred

melody carlson



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SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE I'M ABOUT TO EXPLODE. OR MAYBE I WILL IMplode. I'm not really sure, but I think it's going to get messy. And I think someone's going to get hurt. Probably me.

I turn my CD player up a couple of decibels. Not loud enough to attract his attention—I don't want that—but loud enough to drown out his voice as he rages at my fourteen-year-old brother. I'd like to stand up for Caleb. I even imagine myself going out there and bravely speaking out in my younger brother's defense. But the problem is, I'm just a big chicken.

Besides that, I know what will happen if I try to tell Dad that it's not Caleb's fault, if I try to explain that Mom forgot to give us lunch money again today, and that Caleb was just trying to get by. But I can tell by the volume of Dad's voice that it's already too late for reasoning. And while I can't discern his exact words over the sound of Avril Lavigne's lyrics, I can feel them cutting and slicing through Caleb—and through me.

I imagine my younger brother shredded and bleeding out there. A big red puddle spilled out across the pale yellow linoleum in our kitchen.

My dad never hits us with his fists. He never slaps us around or takes off his belt. He's too concerned about leaving welts or bruises,

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something that someone might notice. But his words are worse than a beating. And they leave invisible scars—scars that never seem to fade.

Finally it gets quiet out there. I hear Caleb's bedroom door, across the hall from mine, closing quietly. He knows not to slam it. That would only prolong the agony. And after a bit, I hear the door to the garage bang shut and then my dad's Ford diesel truck roaring down the driveway and onto the road.

I know that it's safe to go out now. Still feeling guilty for not defending Caleb, I creep out and stand in the hallway, hovering like a criminal in front of his door, my hand poised to knock softly, ready to go in and tell him I understand how he feels and that I'm sorry, but I can hear him crying now. And I can hear him punching something. It sounds like his pillow or maybe his mattress—*pow pow pow* again and again—and I know that trying to say something to him while he's like this will only make things worse.

The last time I tried to comfort him, he got seriously angry at me. He told me that I didn't understand anything. He said that Dad might come down on me sometimes, but never as hard. "You're Dad's favorite," he finally spat, slamming his door in my face. And so I know better than to say anything when he's feeling this mad. But it worries me. What if he becomes like Dad? What if the day comes when I can't even talk to him about anything?

I look at the closed door at the end of the hallway. My parents' bedroom. I know that Mom is in there. I can hear the little TV playing quietly, strains of that obnoxious *Jeopardy!* theme music. It's her favorite show. When she's feeling good, she can get most of the answers right. But she's been in one of her "down" moods for several weeks now. No telling how long this one will last.

As much as I hate to disturb her when she's like this, I know

this is my best chance to ask her for lunch money—for both me and Caleb. Either that or I'll have to see if there's anything in the kitchen that I can use to make us lunches for tomorrow. Either way, I have to make sure that Caleb does not have to borrow money from anyone. I don't know why he went and bummed lunch money from Sally today.

Sally is our cousin. Her family lives in a nicer neighborhood a couple of miles from here, and although she may be good to loan out a buck or two, Caleb should've known she'd tell her dad (who is our dad's older brother). Caleb should've known that Uncle Garrett would call our dad to rib him about Caleb begging money from his precious Sally today. And that's exactly what happened, and that's what ignited our dad's highly volatile fuse tonight.

But in all fairness to Caleb, if it hadn't been the lunch money, it would've been something else. Like a trash can still sitting out on the street, a bike parked in the front yard, shoes left on the floor in the living room . . . it doesn't take much. Dad went ballistic one night last week just because someone left the hose running. Turned out it was him. But he never apologized.

His solution after one of his tirades is to leave here enraged. He goes to one of two places. He wants us to think he's at his friend Jimmy's house, where they mess around with the restoration of an old Corvette and drink cheap beer. But he spends a fair amount of time at The Dark Horse Tavern. It's a sleazy-looking place on one of the side streets downtown. He parks his pickup in the back and hangs out there until he's forgotten whatever it was that made him so angry.

Dysfunctional? Um, *yeah*. But most people looking at our family from the outside are totally clueless. Including Dad's best friend Jimmy and even Uncle Garrett. Despite Uncle Garrett's flaws, I'm

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sure he has no idea that his younger brother has such an out-of-control anger problem. Most people who know my dad think that he's the "nicest guy in town." He manages Jackson's Tire Company and always has a ready smile or goofy joke for everyone — everyone who doesn't live inside this house, that is. And I'm sure that everyone just looks at our family and assumes everything's just fine and dandy in here. Sure, we might not be impressive when it comes to money, but we are all very adept at keeping up appearances. For some reason that's very important to my dad.

My question is, what am I supposed to do with all this pain? I mean I've got Caleb across the hall now, crying and swearing and pounding on things. I've got my mom holed up in her room, eyes glazed over by Xanax I'm sure, sitting in the little glider rocker next to her bed, just staring at the tiny TV that sits on their bureau. I feel like I'm going to burst.

Instead of returning to my room, I go into the bathroom that Caleb and I share. We do our best not to fight over it like some of my friends do with their siblings — at least not while Dad is around. I sigh as I look into the mirror above the bathroom sink. My face, as usual, is expressionless. Although the eyes would be a giveaway, if anyone was really looking. To me they are two black holes. A constant reminder of the deep hopelessness of my life. I push a strand of straight dark hair out of my face. I've been growing my bangs out, and they've reached that place where they're just in the way. Sort of like me.

It won't be that long, and you can be out of this madhouse for good. Recently I've been playing with the idea of graduating a year early, getting out of here when I'm only seventeen. I've heard it can be done.

The question is, can I really last that long? Every single day I tell

myself I'm not going to do this again. I'm not going to give in one more time. And some days I actually succeed. But on other days, like today, it is impossible. The tightness inside my chest is painful right now. And I wonder if a fairly healthy sixteen-year-old can have a heart attack or maybe a stroke. Maybe that would be the answer.

For no particular reason, other than habit, I turn on the tap water and let it just run into the sink. It's how I usually do this thing. Maybe I figure the sound will camouflage what's really going on in here. I don't know. Maybe the swooshing sound relaxes me. Or maybe it's comforting to watch the water flow. Like, there's something that still works. But I just stand there and watch it running down the sink. I don't wash my hands or brush my teeth or wash my face. I simply stand there, hands planted on either side of the sink, as I lean forward and stare at the water flowing from the faucet and going down the drain. I'm sure my dad would think this was not only incredibly stupid but very wasteful. I'm sure if I were ever caught, I would get a sharp-tongued lecture on just how much he pays for the water and electric bill every month and how selfish and ignorant I am. Normally, I do try to be frugal and respectful of his "hard-earned" money, but there are times, like now, when I just don't care.

I don't know how long I stand there wasting valuable water, but finally I turn off the faucet and take a deep breath. I wish I could stop this thing, but I still ache inside. Instead of diminishing, the pain only seems to grow, pushing against my insides until I don't see how I can possibly contain it anymore.

I open the bottom drawer on my side of the bathroom cabinet. It's where I keep my "feminine" products—a place I can be certain that my dad or brother would never go looking. As for my mother, well, she would never think to go looking for anything of mine in

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the first place. She can hardly find her slippers in the morning.

I take out a box of tampons and turn it over. A sliver of silver glints from where the cardboard overlaps on the bottom. I carefully slide out the blade and hold it between my thumb and forefinger. It's an old-fashioned, two-sided kind of blade. I swiped one from Caleb when he first started shaving with my grandpa's old brass razor set. It didn't take my little brother very long to realize that there are better shaving instruments available, so he never notices when a blade goes missing from the little cardboard box in the back of his drawer. Not that I've had to replace many blades during these past six months. As long as you wash and dry them and keep them in a safe place, they can last quite a while.

At first I thought I would limit my cutting to my left arm. But after a few weeks, I started running out of places to cut. And that's when I realized I'm fairly coordinated when it comes to cutting with my left hand. My right arm has a series of evenly spaced stripes to prove this. I push up the sleeve of my shirt and examine the stripes with regular interest, running my fingers over the ones that are healed, barely touching the ones that are still healing. Each one could tell its own story. Okay, the stories would be pretty similar, but each scar is unique. The most recent cut was only two days ago. It's still pretty sore, but at least it's not infected.

Already I am beginning to feel relief. I have no idea why. But it's always like this. Just the security of holding the blade in my hand, just knowing that I am in control now . . . it's almost enough. But not quite.

I lower the blade to the pale skin on the inside of my arm, and using a sharp corner of the blade, I quickly make a two-inch slash. I know not to go too deep. And when I'm in control, like now, I can do it just right. And just like that, I'm done. I hardly feel the pain of

the cut at all. It's like it doesn't even hurt.

I watch with familiar fascination as the blood oozes out in a clean, straight line. There is something reassuring about seeing my bright-red blood exposed like this. It's like this sign that I'm still alive and, weird as it sounds, that someday everything will be okay. Although the euphoria that follows the cutting never lasts as long as I wish it would, it's a quick fix that mostly works.

As usual, I feel better as I press a wad of toilet paper onto the wound. For the moment, this cut absorbs all my attention and emotional energy. It blocks out what I am unable to deal with. And for a while I am convinced that I will actually survive my life.

And, hey, this isn't as bad as doing drugs, like some kids do. Or getting drunk, like my dad is doing right now. Or just checking out, like my mom did last year and continues to do on an off-and-on basis.

Am I proud of my behavior? Of course not. But for the time being, it's all I have to keep me from falling. So don't judge me.