

PAULINE HARMANGE

IN THE BROKEN PLACES [AUX ENDROITS BRISES]

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The tattoo

(Before)

I rode in a damaged Clio with an old, damaged couple who was escaping to the banks of the Loire to patch things up or maybe just to repaint their car. I was forced to share small bits of my life, and mostly listen to them share theirs. After fifty kilometers, they grasped the extent of the problem: I don't like to talk.

I arrived in Tours, and it was nice outside. It was a cheeky, smarmy summer. I was too hot, and I sweated profusely, both from the outrageous temperature and the anxiety that rose in my throat and constantly threatened to drown me. The damaged couple, who were relentlessly kind, dropped me off in front of the studio, which was hidden carefully in a small alley ten minutes from the Loire and downtown. There was a large, blooming tree and not a single cat—no humans, either, by the way. I waited. I had no idea if there was any protocol. Should I announce myself? After dawdling about like an impatient heron, the bells of the church nearby finally rang on the hour. I wanted to flee as fast as my legs could carry me. Or drown myself in the Loire. But it was too late to turn back.

I walked into the studio where four bearded guys were drawing, each at his own drafting table. My slight figure and my lost expression didn't seem to surprise them.

“I'm looking for Yvain?”

My voice sounded funny, but no one else but me could have known that. They pointed to a decrepit staircase spiraling down to the depths of the building, where my mom would have forbidden me to go. But I hadn't come all the way to Tours to let my mom's agitated, illusory voice tell me nonsense.

The tattoo artist was waiting for me. He smiled, and I found him very handsome. “Naturally my type” were the words I later used to describe him to my sister. He was a brunette. When he smiled, a dimple dented his left cheek, and he smiled often.

“I’m waiting for Anaïs. That’s you?”

I gave a feverish but controlled nod. I was certainly Anaïs.

I immediately liked Yvain. Nonetheless, I had struggled with the idea of finding myself alone in a cellar with a stranger and no cell service for several hours, but with him, I was suddenly calm. I was okay.

The design was ready. The tattoo artist placed it on the side of my bare abdomen, and I felt each strand of hair prick up. When he removed the paper and the purple shadow of the translucent Daphne stood out against the milky paleness of my skin, I shivered. So this was who I was? Who I could be, if I let myself? I wasn’t convinced. Deep in my soul, I pleaded with the creator of miracles to stop waiting. I wanted to transform myself.

You have to be a bit masochistic—crazy, even—to want a tattoo. I knew very well it would hurt like hell. And I knew I would resist the pain without complaining. When I began these bargains with myself, I was subtly yet stubbornly determined to control this pain. Because my body, far from being sensitive, is prone to all sorts of ailments, and of course I control none of them. Even my ears were pierced at an age too tender for it to have been of my own volition. It was a profound weariness mixed with a bit of anger that drove me, an allegedly happy young woman, to consciously inflict the pain of a tattoo on myself.

Once I lay down in a near-comfortable position and the music was carefully chosen, I closed my eyes and waited for it. The pen switched on with a muffled sound. Yvain’s black-gloved hands pressed against me, and I stopped myself from shuddering. The velvet jazz dripped from the speakers hidden under the wooden beams, and it put me in a trance. I floated outside of time and space. In that instant and the hours that followed, I was simply an

imperfect, marble block into which someone carved a fate, one that didn't belong to me anymore.

I watched Yvain's face drifting under my closed eyelids, his dimpled smile, while his voice, low and husky like a Sunday smoker's, blended with Chet Baker's trumpet in my ears.

His touch was soft. What kind of lover was he? A stupid question, if those exist, but empty of any lust. A nearly pure form of curiosity, focused on skin mainly because the dude was knead-rolling the taught flesh around my rib cage and he did it with a sense of care that you rarely see men with their masculinity exhibit. If he was so gentle with someone he didn't know, how would he be with a lover? I thought about the hands of the few men who had explored my skin, the harshness of the cold that made my own hands blue, my nail biting. The tattoo artist took glass shards speckled with my weaknesses and embedded them eternally into the underside of my armor. For a few moments, I teetered on the edge of the void, knowing my tattoo would outlive my consciousness. When I shut my eyes for the very last time, the Daphne that Yvain was etching just above my bones would continue to look into the distance.

Daphne's story is tragic and symptomatic of an ancient fascination for forced love. Cupid, god of matchmaking and love at first sight, pierces Apollo, who we imagine probably wasn't ugly or club-footed, with an arrow that makes him fall head over heels for Daphne. What could have been the most glorious romantic comedy soon turns sour. Cupid is not there to have fun but to take revenge. He shoots the young woman with a different arrow which makes her forever disgusted with love. Apollo, like all gods and probably all men, has a hard time taking her no for what it is and pursues her ruthlessly. Exhausted from having to travel far and wide to escape her stalker, Daphne asks her dad for help. The guy could do anything—nothing inhibits him because he's a god, too—but he decides to turn his own daughter into a tree. A laurel tree, so that she will always give off a pleasant odor. The story,

already not very commendable, might as well end here. Any human being built normally and raised correctly would let their conquest go the moment the object of affection turns into a plant. But not Apollo. Like a proper Greek god, faced with the monumental *no* from the sprouting Daphne, he makes the laurel tree his favorite tree and turns it into a symbol of triumph. Of *triumph*. I cannot imagine a bigger nose thumbing.

Stories of love and lovelessness fascinate me. Stories where women say no and hear in return, “Your opinion doesn’t matter” incite me and make me angry. When I came across this story and this design, I thought about all the tales of women who are sold and bartered, drawn in and hunted down, and I told myself: a tragedy is a tragedy, this one has the same value as all the others, and it could become my own.

While I entertained all sorts of conversations with myself, Yvain transformed my body. Would a tattoo artist take themselves for Pygmalion? I, for one, would become unbearably full of myself if hordes of people rushed to my doorstep to have my art drawn on them. I got the feeling that my tattoo artist (he became mine once I agreed to undress in front of him) had his head screwed on right.

After a while, we mutually decided to take a break. He offered me a coffee. He was nice enough not to go out to smoke and leave me shivering and alone in this low-ceilinged room. I was tired, and he had purple bags under his deep-set eyes. I don’t remember what we discussed, but I was amazed at how easy our conversation was for me, when I normally jumble and tangle my words, unable to sort out which to keep and which to throw away. There was a simple intensity in this relationship, anchored in brevity as much as in infinity. Without gloves, his hands were elegant and strong. They grasped his coffee cup like a buoy. I imagined he had a hard time getting sleep. He didn’t gnaw on his fingernails—they were carefully filed down, and countless rings of ink were drawn at irregular intervals around his joints. I retained nothing tangible from our conversation, no long speeches to faithfully

transcribe, and the only thing I remember is a single phrase that's printed inside me like he had tattooed it on the edge of my hairline.

“In any case, Limoges is a city where you go to die.”

There was a prolonged trail of humor in his voice. He wanted to say that Limoges was ugly, Limoges was dead, that only old people would want to stop at the train station and never leave, unless they were carried out feet first. He, like myself, had never seen Limoges.

The inking started again, and after a while the repeated vibrations on the sides of my body weakened my will to act tough. We think we've been tanned like old leather because our daily reality entails back cramps, upset stomachs, and sore breasts—then a few needles are skillfully stuck in you and you feel a new pain, never before experienced. I wanted to clench my teeth and tell him to stop when he colored in the blank spaces with black ink, that it hurt, and even though it was nothing, compared to so much other suffering, I had the possibility to end it, to flip the switch. It would have been completely stupid to leave with half a Daphne, half the endeavor, but I could do it and the idea intoxicated me. For a few seconds, I thought about keeping the other part of my strength, the less glorious, and going home half transformed. It was powerful and it was tempting.

I relaxed my jaw. With a concerned tone, Yvain said, “It's almost finished, promise.”

I smiled bravely and took deep breaths in order not to move too much. The skin-level pain was seductive, unprecedented, and I contemplated it. There are Histories of violence, Histories of France, and Histories of the world, so I began constructing a mental image of the History of pain. I indexed; I mapped territories more and more familiar to me. And in this madness that I have claimed and that led me here, I found a curiosity to visit new landscapes and test new terrain.

Soon, of course, the craftsman finished his work and the artist admired his creation by cleaning it carefully. Every centimeter of raw skin he touched, every dab of lotion-covered

tissue was an affliction and a blessing at the same time. My body was bruised on the outside, with fifteen centimeters of open wounds that oozed lymph and blood that Yvain rushed to wrap in brown cellophane. I was delighted, tortured alive.

He shook my hand with a firm, gentle grip and thanked me, who for my part had no words powerful or beautiful enough to tell him what he had done. I wanted to say, “Thank you for transforming me.” Tattoo artists are not shrinks, I thought. If the dude had wanted me to explain the ins and outs of an act simultaneously intimate and extimate, he would’ve asked. The weirdness of the situation swept across me like a veil: there I was, metamorphized, still the same yet profoundly different, and for him it was just another day at work. He had maybe even dragged his feet to get here.

I paid, smiled, said thank you, and I left like I had come. It was seven p.m. and I had half an hour to find the meeting point where I’d hop into another jalopy to be carried back to my normal life. My life, the one belonging to Anais Nollet, sales clerk who sold pots, pans, and machine mixers, a small and insignificant woman with faded dreams and limited ambitions, constantly at the end of her rope. As I walked, I thought about the “what-ifs” that play out and thwart the motivations of heroes in movies and TV shows. About my boyfriend—who was not really my type from the start but who shared my life—and his dumbfounded reaction when I had told him about this trip. Experiencing something this extraordinary gave me an ephemeral sensation like alcohol vapor floating in my wake, and I wondered how long it would last.

Moments only hold the value we give them. From that afternoon, I remembered the laurel tree-woman nestled fully against me, and sometimes when I look at her, I sense Yvain’s rubber fingers holding my skin before he pierced me. And I remember the sentence that continued to haunt me:

“Limoges is a city where you go to die.”

Like a ridiculous mantra reminding me the strength of a concealed death wish.

We did many more foolish things for less than these few words.

Family

I give up. The day has just begun, but I give up—I will never make it. There will always be a toy lying around or a half-chewed carrot stuck under the highchair tray. I inhale fully, overly tense and out of breath, surveying the room around me. When I exhale, I try to expel the stress that has paralyzed me since I woke up. My daughter pulls me out of my numbing daydream by tugging on my pants and splitting the air with her piercing cry. In becoming a mother, I have learned that piercing cries are not always signs of imminent danger—I learned to sometimes like when an outburst of noisy joy makes my eardrums recoil. I lean down and pick up my daughter, who is still too light to escape my stifling expressions of love. She smells like milk, sleep, and baby. She is one year old.

And Ninon doesn't care, really, if there are dust bunnies under the couch, if my shirt is not ironed. Her fist in her drooling mouth, she looks at me with her large eyes, which are still blue. The two of us know that in a few hours, food will be smeared all over her and everyone will find her adorable. I calm down a bit. My shoulders loosen, my face relaxes, and I hold her against me to inhale the smell of her simplicity again.

Then, free of a weight, I detect the scents of our upcoming lunch and the melody that Marc hums in his deep voice from the kitchen. Here, now. With our child in my arms, I go plant a kiss on his freshly-shaven cheek where he smells of aftershave and, underneath, soap.

“It's going to be okay, Camille,” he tells me, always reassuring, always calm.

I nod bravely, Ninon laughs, and the doorbell rings.

I have to summon all my strength not to take one last look in the mirror—I would have seen nothing but the rings under my eyes, my slightly filthy hair, and the collar of my shirt sticking out—before I open the front door.

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Axel smiles and taps the steering wheel to the rhythm of the pop song resounding through the car. The heater is too strong, I am nauseous, my stomach hurts, and I want to turn around. I sigh again.

“It’s going to be okay,” he tells me, his voice swinging with the intonations of the song.

I give an unconvincing grunt. It’s his turn to sigh, and he says, a bit exasperated, “Come on, play your part, okay?”

Ah, yes. Play my part. It’s true this is not something I excel at. Smoothing down corners, smiling at the right moment, putting a little water in the wine... Anyhow, I restrain myself from retorting curtly that these things are easy for him. After all, he is not my mom’s daughter. He can breathe easy without fearing the oxygen will be stolen from under his nose.

I am not really making it easy for myself, I admit. I watch the urban scenery fly by outside the window without saying another word. It’s just another moment of unhappiness to live through.

Finally, Axel brakes and parks. I slam the door, my heart beating, my hands damp, rings of sweat already forming under my armpits. Going to a family reunion shouldn’t be as stressful as going to a job interview. Suddenly, behind me, someone calls, “Heyo, Anaïs!”

Interrupted in my momentum, I trip, barely catching myself on my boyfriend’s arm. Axel turns, already equipped with his most charming smile. It’s not even forced, that’s what’s most annoying. He slides his hand into mine, and I hold on, gathering stamina. My parents are here. My retired dad, with his hands in his pockets and his eyes looking into the distance, seems to be absent. He bows his head, saying nothing. He too is already tired of being here, I think. My mom, with her blond hair that is turning silver and her coral silk scarf perfectly

knotted around her barely-wrinkled neck, looks at me from head to toe, then from toe to head. She shrugs and places her cheek against mine.

“So, you didn’t recognize your mom?”

“I didn’t know you were here yet. Did you come together?” I asked, sneering, unable to help myself.

My mom’s eyelashes, saturated with mascara, blink heavily. She knows I am wary of her second husband’s silhouette. He never comes to the family dinners my sister hosts, because “no one does that.” However, she doesn’t let herself become flustered and says with charisma, “Your dad came to pick me up. He’s always been a gentleman, you know.”

Behind her, the concerned party gives a small laugh of complicity. This is my mom: divorced, yet fifteen years later, still concerned about the eyes of her neighbors—and not even of her own. In any case, no one can accuse my parents of destroying each other. Incidentally, she slides her arm into the crux of my dad’s elbow, and he kind of straightens up, once again filled with the pride of having such a beautiful woman at his side. They walk past us, leaving me in their wake. I deflate like a balloon, and the twisted knot of apprehension in my stomach unravels a bit. Axel interlaces his finger with mine in a gesture of support. Maybe it won’t be so unbearable this time.

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Things are going—if not smoothly, at least correctly. Perhaps because it’s the birthday of the one person everyone here loves, and the three of us are determined not to be the one who breaks the status quo of our polite compliance. Our mother hasn’t pointed out the messes I tried to hide, Anaïs didn’t groan when her boyfriend heavily complimented the Japanese

engraving hanging in the hallway and flaunted his knowledge about Hokusai. And I resisted the temptation to take her aside and beg her to spare us Axel's presence next time.

While Ninon is at the center of attention, I can rest. As long as everyone is interested in her and not how Marc and I are raising her, I allow myself to leisurely sip my gin and tonic and then my wine, losing my gaze in the hubbub of conversations. During the aperitif, I notice that Axel's hand is posed on Anaïs' knee, that he is at ease and self-confident, happy to be part of the pack. When he complimented our mother, she giggled in delight. A moment of hesitation when my sister's brunette head leaned down onto her partner's shoulder and I looked away, feeling like a witness to a moment of vulnerability I wasn't supposed to see. Intimacy, a sweet thrill.

Lunch ends, smooth and warm as my child's skin under the springtime sun. As I observe everyone at the table busy with their piece of cheese before we move on to dessert, and a decorated cake with a single candle that Ninon's tiny lungs won't be able to blow out, I tell myself: this is family, too. Putting collective harmony over tensions that disrupt relationships outside of these moments where, together, we try to be less harsh, less sour. The effort we spend leaves me deep in thought. Not for the first time, I wonder pointlessly if all families are like lakes with still water that should not be disturbed.

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Axel's presence allows me to melt into the background. He has no problem taking up space, bridging gaps, and filling silences. I disappear behind the sound of his voice, I make myself small, and I burrow deep inside myself. I don't know how to do anything else, and what's worse, I enjoy being able to blend in like this, the critical eyes that expect me to light up with something turn away over the course of the meal. He is my light. He, who carries

himself so well, without glitches or slipups. When he is here, my mom only has eyes for him and she excuses me for everything, even my tastelessness. I am nothing successful, no great violinist or architect, but at least I found a good match.

He is my excuse and my pillar, too. Next to him, his pomposity, his clothing, I can relax. With my head on his shoulder, I sigh almost with ease. Things are going... well.

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Ninon eats a first spoonful of cake, then a second. She exclaims, "Oh, yum!"

It's a large sponge cake full of ganache and cream, decorated with her name. She wasn't capable of blowing out her candle, but it was for the best, because I was able to etch an image of this perfect configuration in my memory. The blond, curly-haired child, her father with his green eyes and disheveled hair, both leaning over the glossy frosting with inflated cheeks, the light of the harmless fire encircling them in gold. This is the color of love.

We cut the cake, a slice for everyone, and Ninon devours hers like a tiny, voracious hen. It's only when she opens her third gift (how many new toys can such a small creature receive at once?) that the drama explodes loudly. The child stops mid-gesture, and her hands flitter to her well-rounded stomach. She starts to moan that it hurts, her face turns red and her forehead damp. Then she vomits right there on the carpet.

She no longer resembles the little happy, chirping baby I know. At my feet, I suddenly have a tormented little being that wails and writhes in a puddle of her own pre-digested meal. My mother, her eyes wide, doesn't know what to do: leap to the sick child's rescue like she's been issued to follow her protective, grandmotherly instincts? Or, rather, get as far away as possible from the thick and noxious substance that is shooting like a geyser out of this small mouth with barely any teeth? Ninon hiccups, Ninon cries. The shock that the party has

changed course settles, and I get up. My inebriation is suddenly unnoticeable, because adrenaline and cortisol have taken over. With Marc on my heels, I manage the crisis with him, as two efficient parents. We disappear without saying anything to our guests, the sickly child sticking to her dad's nice embroidered shirt.

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"She shouldn't have eaten all that cake," my mom says, breaking the silence with her disapproving tone.

"It's her birthday, Mom," I say as neutrally as I possibly can.

"Good thing I didn't let you two gorge yourselves to your liking on your birthdays, that's all I'm saying."

I roll my eyes as I roll off the couch where Axel's unyielding presence cannot cancel out how undesirably close I am to my mom. Axel is tense, looking disgustedly at the orange, stinky puddle that is starting to dry and become encrusted in the carpet. He doesn't like kids that much, I understood this pretty quickly. Too noisy, too messy, impossible to remove the batteries when you're tired of seeing them riled up. He always tried to play it off around Ninon, but I suspect Camille knows. He didn't have to force himself to go to the first birthday party of a kid he doesn't care for, but that wouldn't have fit with his plan (and my own, too, more or less) to appear absolutely perfect in my parents' eyes.

My dad sighs and says, "Well, I'm going for a cigarette." And he lets his palms fall wearily onto his thighs with a heavy clack. I'd die to join him. We could smoke together under the porch, maybe exchange more than a few words. But I intercept my mom's eyes, which darken with disappointment and fix themselves on my dad's shoulder blades as he takes his pack out of his jean pocket. He must also feel her eyes, but he happily ignores it.

This is the freedom he bought with the divorce. If I follow him, my mom will make me pay double for leaving the scene, and reproach me like she'd love to do with her ex-husband who never wanted to stop smoking and who contaminated their daughter with this vulgar addiction. And who took the liberty to not give a damn. You can't divorce your own mother. So I champ at the bit. The silence thickens, and upstairs we hear Ninon's muffled, ever-fervent howls and her parents' simpers in effort to control their worry—but who would really like to know what's going on.

While I am thinking of the well-deserved cigarette that waits for me once I'm home, I rub my itching ribcage and stare blankly out the window at the garden hedge. Axel spurts, “Don't scratch, Anaïs!”

I freeze. He's right. I don't want to damage my healing tattoo, which is coated in greasy balm under my cotton blouse. My mom jumps at the chance to take the offered subject of conversation.

“What is it, my dear? Is it your eczema again?”

“Mom, it's been ten years since I last had eczema.”

“Those kinds of things never go away forever,” she responds in a sharp voice. I turn around, and her eyebrows, knitted in an acute angle, make me smile. I open my mouth to reassure her, but Axel beats me to it.

“It's not eczema, Catherine, it's her new tattoo!”

I stiffen. My mom's lips, impeccably tinted, form a perfect, unwrinkled O, a mask of horror painted on her face.

Axel makes a sheepish expression. “Did I say something?”

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