

Brand

*Layers of loss are braided together, encircling my heart.  
Strands of sisterhood are suddenly, shockingly absent.  
Grief settles upon my chest, heavy and insistent, an unwelcome visitor.  
I'd forgotten the invisibility of mourning.*

I spent the year between my sister's suicide and my mother's death in a therapeutic relationship with a professional Domme. I originally hired Ma'am to help me create closure for a different relationship, and our connection took a deep dive into embodied grief work.

I felt alone in my grief, in my longing, in my unending desire to be seen. And then, every other week I spent two hours with Ma'am where I was seen, respected, held, and supported. I was decidedly not alone. This was where I brought my tears, where I let down my walls, where my body could feel every emotion. It was where I was safe.

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I arrive at the house to find Ma'am and her partner Lex chatting on the porch, waiting for me. When we were planning this, Ma'am asked if I'd let her partner wield the strike while she held me down. I told her I thought so, but asked her why. "Because the fear is usually so intense that I don't think I could keep you calm enough and accurately make the mark. I'd want you to be able to focus on our connection, on why you want this permanent scar."

After a minute of friendly banter, Ma'am shifts us toward the task at hand. We enter her house-turned-dungeon, the space my body reveres as a sanctuary. I smile at the faint music playing in the background – she'd made a playlist of my favorite music, because she thinks of everything.

The tools are set out on the table as she'd promised. She asks Lex to explain each one to me: a blowtorch, flint sparker, pliers to hold the metal piece, a bowl of cold water to place the metal in once it was done. Lex hands me a two-and-a-half-inch piece of metal she shaped into an

S – the piece that will brand my chest. Since it’s only half an eight, I realize it will take two strikes.

I gulp. Ma’am watches my eyes change from green to grey as I shift from anxious to afraid. She also feels my resolve, hears me answer yes through the fear.

Ma’am invites me to tell Lex why I chose this mark. I speak briefly about what it means to be the eighth of eight children, how after my sister’s suicide it’s even more essential to assert that I am always eight of eight. She listens intently, thanks me for sharing the story behind the brand.

“It’s time,” Ma’am tells me. I take off my shirt and bra, lay them gently across a chair at the edge of the room.

She sits on the floor with her back against the black leather couch, beckons me to sit between her legs. Ma’am pulls me to her and holds me against her body. My large breasts rest on the folds of my belly. The intimate safety of her embrace tries to quell my nerves. It doesn’t work.

“When you’re ready, this is how I’ll hold you still.” Her firm hands grasp my shoulders as she speaks. My arms rest at my sides and I place my hands on her thighs to ground me. She whispers into the nape of my neck, “You can do this.”

Lex crouches in front of me with the cold metal S, places it on my chest where the mark will live to make sure it fits. The size and shape of the metal are just right for creating a full round number eight just below my heart chakra.

*Click.*

*Spark.*

The blowtorch begins to heat the metal shape that will mark my skin. The wait is long; heating metal for this sort of strike brand isn't fast. Ma'am murmurs to me about courage and strength, about why this matters. I let her sweetness distract me from the fear simmering in my throat. "When you're ready, tell her and she'll do the first strike."

*Will I ever be ready for this searing hot curve of metal to burn my flesh?* But I nod slightly and take a short shallow breath. "I'm ready."

"OK. Breathe with me. She'll touch it to your chest on our out breath."

In. Hold the air in my lungs for just a moment. Then out.

Hot metal presses against my chest for one, two, three seconds. I whimper softly and she coos at me. "Shh, it's OK. You did it. Good girl."

We're halfway done.

Lex reheats the metal to finish the mark and complete my eight. I can't believe it's happening again but I'm this far in, there's no stopping now.

When I'm told it's ready I jump a little. Ma'am grips my shoulders tighter. "Just breathe with me."

"OK. Ready." Another breath in together. As we breathe out in unison, Lex places the metal on my skin again, pushes it harder and holds it longer. Four seconds. Five.

When she finally pulls it off I gasp for air. Their words fall all over me about how well I did, that I stayed so still.

It's done.

Third degree burns from the scorching metal form a white number eight at my sternum. Ma'am lets me rest against her, runs her fingers through my hair to soothe me as it starts to sink in. "Turn around so I can see," she invites.

She grins as I twist my body, her eyes proud and full of encouragement. “It’s beautiful! What do you think?”

“I’m in shock,” I mumble. “But I like it. It’s amazing. I did it!”

“You did it so well.”

I curl into her open arms and rest. Lex leaves us alone to process, sets about putting away the tools. I am high from endorphins, loopy and stunned. I’m surprised that it didn’t hurt more.

What I don’t yet realize is that this was the easy part.

A shift in the air lets me know me it is time to leave. She would never overtly tell me our time was up, but I always know. We completed the day’s business so I have to go.

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The next day, I sent Ma’am a photo of a brand new toothbrush and a bottle of peroxide. She texted back *Have fun!* What my text didn’t show was the tentative way I used these tools on the tender skin of my chest. My instructions were to rough up the burn by pouring peroxide on the toothbrush and scrubbing as hard as I could manage.

I tried to channel her delight at pushing the bristles of the brush across this raw wound. For a week I had to keep the burn from scabbing over to make sure it scarred evenly. If I wanted the line to fade quickly, I could baby it and treat it with love. But if I wanted it to scar, I had to mess with it.

Every day or two I’d take a photo of the brand to send to Ma’am to check on how it looked. *Was I doing it right? Would it scar the way I hoped?* She approved each time, told me it should turn into precisely the scar I was trying to cultivate.

Finally, it was time to let the burn scab over and heal. I threw away the peroxide toothbrush of torture and did my best not to pick at the scab forming in a dark and crusty layer in

the shape of an eight. The brand healed into a beautiful, slightly off-center eight on my chest. The scar appears as a raised line about a quarter inch thick, just a little bit whiter than the pale skin above my sternum. Hardly anyone in my life has seen it, but its existence makes my grief visible to me.

Two weeks after she held me while the eight burned into my skin, Ma'am stood five feet in front of me and threw a single tail at it. As I felt the whip strike the newly healed skin at my center, I breathed in a sense of wholeness I'd never experienced. *This is my body. I belong here. This is who I am. I have been wounded by grief and have learned to process that grief through physical pain. This is how I heal and I am not alone in it.*

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For the next eight months, I managed to hide the mark on my chest from my daughter. I turned away to take off my clothes, stopped letting her shower with me. Friends argued that she could handle it — even Ma'am questioned why I kept it hidden. But it didn't feel right. I wasn't willing to tell my daughter about the brand. Both her parents have large visible tattoos and she's fascinated by the stories our ink tells. But this was different. I couldn't find a way to explain how branding works that wouldn't scare her. This scar was intentionally placed on a part of my body only visible when I want it to be. I didn't want my daughter to have to keep this secret. And honestly, I wasn't sure she was capable.

Then one day I was slow getting dressed as she showered. The pink polka-dot beach towel slipped as I reached to dry her off when she finally evacuated the hot water. "What's that?! Is that an eight? But how?" Her words tumbled out into so many questions.

"It's a scar," I said, grasping for accurate words that would only tell as much as I was willing to reveal.

“Is it like a tattoo? How did it happen?”

“It’s sort of like a tattoo, but different. It doesn’t involve ink and isn’t colored.”

I watched her eyes flit back and forth as she tried to process these details. “Who did that to you?”

That was the one answer I wouldn’t divulge. “That’s private,” I managed to say.

“Whoever it was must be someone really kind.” Her voice was smooth with reverence.

“Well, you’re right about that.” I couldn’t help but laugh, knowing Ma’am would appreciate that remark if I got the chance to tell her.

“How long has it been there?” my daughter wanted to know. When I told her it had been eight months she was surprised. “Why didn’t you show me?”

I tried to explain that while it isn’t a secret, it’s private. It isn’t something I want many people to know. So I don’t talk about it much.

Her face fell as she tried to make sense of this. “You didn’t think I could keep it secret?”

I smiled at her earnestness. “No, Little Bear, I didn’t want you to have to keep it secret. That isn’t your job.”

That seemed to make sense to her and I let out a long slow sigh. I didn’t have to hide from her anymore.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone about your eight. I promise.” Her solemn vow pierced my heart.

Tears blurred my eyes as I forced a smile back at her. I cried for her sweet devotion and her excitement to be included in my private experience. I cried quiet tears for the abrupt loss of my relationship with Ma’am, the one who taught me to breathe through grief.

With an orange and white striped bath towel I dried off my daughter's smooth brown skin, pulled her dark curly hair into a twist on top of her head. "Let's see who gets dressed first," I invited, anxious to get on with the day. In my bedroom, as I tucked my breasts into a bra, I let my fingers brush against my eight and felt the tears start again.