

“Epidermis”

‘No numbing cream needed. Took 4 hours,’ says Gabby with a spiky energy about her. She winces taking off her hoodie. This isn’t first ink.

‘Guess you won’t be needing contraception with that thing on your rig.’

‘Shut up Mum...it’s a faithful rendition of *Ashida Kagumo*. I’m not interested in attracting anyone.’ Her mother bows her head at the spider tattoo crawling all over the shoulder, one-foot rests on her daughter’s pale clavicle. Beautifully executed yet fierce. Father pipes in, ‘Bloody big Huntsman! Grab the pesticide.’

Gabby is in a Japanese phase this month, wrapping herself in family banter as if wearing a precious kimono. Mother tunes into the *ikigai* moments of being small, smiling in form but deeply sad within.

‘Couldn’t you pick a prettier design?’ says Mother not really remembering what pretty might mean for Gabby now that she’s twenty-two. She’s far away from collecting sea stars, from being a gazelle running along the beach, hair flying in the breeze. The child of simple happier times erased.

‘Mum... Stop judging me! You’re such a cleanskin. One day I might be totally covered in ink and have my tongue split!’ She flicks a business card across the table where it lands near mother’s steaming tea. Its gold embossed, stating: “MASURO TONAKI: Epidermal Modification, Tattoos, Scarification, Branding’

Tonaki San wants me to be his model when he works in Australia! Said I have a resilient quality. He runs a chair at Mr Dolphin Tattoo shop.”

Mother shudders. ‘Tongue split?’ But Gabby doesn’t hear or care as she scrolls through TONAKI gallery on her phone, uploading her spider, totally immersed.

Mother slips the business card into her pocket, it feels dangerous. This Tonaki San has a frightening skillset and over 50,000 followers. She can’t bear that Gabby might be burned or have her tongue cut in half; transmogrified into a reptilian. She won’t allow it. Not on her baby. And cleanskin... well it gets under Mother’s skin. She feels disrespected, always walking on egg shells with Gabby.

She brews another tea as if in ceremony, recalling Gabby’s final school year. They were called into the Counsellor’s stifling little room with wonky vertical blinds, a dying pot plant on his desk. The Counsellor was sweaty, his glasses fogged. ‘We’ve spoken to you before about Gabby’s disfiguring of her work but she persists in garnishing every essay in graffiti.’

For as long as Mother could remember, Gabby had doodled with a Shafer pen in the margins of her homework, even in primary school, she was being curiously creative.

Now he lined up page after page of essays surrounded in sharks with drops of dried blood, her Maths book doodled in lewd women with scars and sewn up lips.

‘It’s her blood.’ He nodded to the sharks. ‘Totally unacceptable.’

‘Plenty of artists use blood and body fluids. It’s my own gauche.’ said Gabby. ‘One minute you want me to be experimental, to make a unique portfolio, the next you want to rein me in.’ Mother breathed deeply. She defended, ‘We don’t always agree with her choices. She’s a high achiever in a pressure cooker year that’s almost at an end. Please don’t crush her spirit in a school of this calibre. She’s kind, takes risks yes but...’

‘This is more than risk taking,’ said the Counsellor.

‘Haven’t you noticed your plant needs water?’ asked Gabby. Words were swords in that moment, Mother and Dad grew afraid for they knew she was super sensitive to the world and its scrolling trends, anxious around people with faces she found unreadable. Hugging as a baby had made her squirm.

‘I want to be as great as Tonaki San, I find him wise,’ says Gabby and Mother shakes her head. What now? A tattoo gun arrives with a palette of inks from eBay. They watch as she engraves around her ankle. She weaves fish scales between koi, an ibis and a rat.

‘Dad, let me ink you.’

‘Have you got rocks in your head?’

‘How about a nice sailor’s mermaid on your bicep? The gun buzzes in his direction.

‘Stop it, just stop!’ he snatches the gun from her grip.

‘Loser, stop being chicken,’ whispers Gabby.

‘You’re always pushing us,’ whimpers Father.

‘Gabby you’re overstepping boundaries now,’ Mother tries to use the language of Gen Z. How can she teach her Zen?

‘Can’t you take no for an answer?’

‘Why can’t you guys push beyond your limits? Don’t be fossils.’

Mother’s blood is at boiling point; a kettle with steam that has nowhere to go, that’s when Gabby announces, ‘I have another appointment with the master. No tattoo this time.’ Her eyes glisten.

‘Over my dead body!’ seethes Mother and that’s when she goes to the privacy of her bedroom and makes an appointment for herself.

Masuro Tonaki wears Fluro orange glasses and his bald head doesn’t shine because it’s covered in tats. He bows ceremoniously and Mother peers into a bloodshot eye on his crown chakra. The gesture gives her a strange sense of peace within the metal mash music dialled up loud.

‘What may I do for you today?’ His voice is silk. She looks around the shop walls covered in photos of naked humans most with ink, a man with a branded tree on his stomach, dermal beading on a beautiful breast.

‘I don’t want you to see my daughter ever again, no matter how much she begs or wants to pay.’

‘Daughter? I see many women in a week.’ His split tongue pokes out, he licks his lips. Mother is reviled. She fumbles and pulls out her phone finding a photo ‘Her name is Gabrielle. Our angel.’

‘Aah...Wabi-sabi girl; a broken teacup mended with gold lacquer. She carries her imperfections well. No stopping her, she has strong mind of the water snake. If not me...some other artist will give her what she wants.’

‘I don’t think so, she respects you and your artistry only. She’s fixated. Please, I beg you.’ Mother wrings her hands, ‘We’re at our wits end. We’ve endured a lot. Surely your mother felt the same...why look at you, there’s not an inch of flesh that doesn’t have ink or scarring.’ He is calm in her bitter tone. Their eyes roam the hundreds of conjoined lotus flowers, skulls, clocks, scientific formulae, magical words colouring his skin.

‘My mother has learned to loosen her rigid view of perfectionism. I guess you could say she’s had a hard time giving up our national past time. I’m also prohibited from public bathing in Japan. No sad loss.’ And he smiles with warmth. ‘She accepts me as her flawed son or loses me. A second-by-second choice. Because you have booked my time today, we must make an honourable exchange. You will be my canvas.’ Mother stops breathing, the pact becomes clear. Her voice trembles, ‘Well...well do what you will and promise me; no Gabrielle.’ He shakes her hand. She strips timidly to her underwear, her fleshy midriff and breasts exposed, she lies on her stomach. He smooths 3 tubes of numbing crème across her back, dials the music louder. Then begins to draw freehand and chuckles, ‘so long virgin skin.’

Her heartbeats smack into the bed, reverberating through the pulse in her throat. She feels nothing at first, the thrumming gun milder than a bee sting but at the 3 hours mark she is

panting, as she had in childbirth. Burning, stinging, cringing against each stroke.

‘No wriggling,’ he says sharply. ‘Try to meditate, the more you struggle and resist, the greater the pain.’ Mother begins to cry and every needle prick revives a memory of being helpless in rearing her daughter.

‘I just want to fricking feel...something!’ Gabby had screamed at them in the curtained room of the hospital. It was the last week, she’d refused exams.

‘Are you trying to kill yourself?’ asked the nurse in Emergency. Dad had tied a sock around her upper underarm. Blood seeped through.

‘No. I just can’t play the game.’

‘Do you need a painkiller?’

‘I can’t feel a thing.’

‘Are you on drugs?’

‘No’.

‘Have you been assaulted? Sexually or otherwise?’

‘No.’

‘We’ll organise a tetanus shot, maybe some Valium. Did you use anything rusty?’

‘A scalpel,’ gulped Mother, ‘It lives in her bedside drawer.’

The glint of it shocked her. They sat on the hospital bed and Gabby flinched when they put the stitches in. She was dressed as a Goth in this phase, parents clutching onto her ragged blackness. ‘Why did you go through my stuff? Can’t you respect my privacy?’ said Gabby. One fluffy black false eyelash fell to the floor, a fallen rook.

Mother tried to hold her hand. ‘You’re too beautiful for this. Stop destroying your skin.’

‘Skin is my artform...the only thing truly mine. I’ll never trust you again.’ The nurse walked off in disgust, seeing 50 or more hardened scar lines creeping towards Gabby’s wrist. The family was a misunderstood mess. Tattoos were more benign than the savage cuttings of Gabby’s teenage years.

Mother sobs. Masuro Tonaki places his hand gently on her sacrum. ‘Crying is the way your eyes speak when your mouth can’t explain how broken your heart is. It’s okay to let it all out.’ He gives her a tissue. ‘Your body is a container of regrets.’

She nods. ‘It’s unbearable, I’m too filled up.’ She has no idea of what Tonaki has designed on her. She smells burning, her tears don’t flow. The room swirls around her and she passes out. After 6 hours, he spreads herbal concoction and wraps her in Glad Wrap. She is shock shivering, epidermis enraged. ‘Show me what you’ve done?’ she whispers. With a flick of his

tongues and a swipe of her credit card, he says, 'You will be forever wondering what you carry on your back. Use a mirror at home. I've called an Uber; you're in no condition to drive,' he says as he leads her out of the shop with a brochure for aftercare and maintenance.

Mother emits weird noises as she stumbles through the front door. She weeps as Gabby gently unwinds the plastic wrapping like a shed skin. Snot drips from mother's nose. Gabby can barely contain her excitement at seeing the snake writhing along the entire spine, interwoven with Japanese characters that will take months to translate and define Tonaki's code.

'It's incredible! It's the *Irezumi* snake with the smiling head of *Jizo*. The snake of wisdom and fertility bound with the Buddhist protector of children.' Mother twists around trying to see but doubles over in pain and Gabby gently helps turn her towards a mirror.

Mother's head hangs where she gazes at Father's bare feet as he slips into the room, 'We've been looking for you all over the place. Can't you answer your phone?'

Three large dots are inked on his hairy big toe. 'Bloody hell?' says Mother.

'Gabby got to me with her gun,' he says sheepishly. 'A dot for each of us.'

He places his hand gently on his wife's shoulder. 'What have you done to yourself?'

'I was terrified, I'm not sure, I fainted!'

'He's branded you, Mum, can't you feel this?' Gabby tenderly presses the fleshy rise just above her mother's buttocks. Mother squeals... 'oh no.' What is it? It's so painful!

'It's a tramp stamp,' says Father, with a cheeky grin. 'It says Ha-Ha. What on earth?'

'Ha-Ha. Like a joke?' whimpers Mother.

'No, it's Japanese for Mother. Ha-ha means Mum. You're a legend! Cudos.'

The small wellspring of common ground has them giggling like children. Gabby hugs her mother. Cleanskins no more.