

Rule Number One: No Crying.

It always happens when he apologizes. When his anger snowballs into a rage of screams and punches I don't shed a tear. I'm a statue then, incapable of feeling the pain erupting in my body. Later when he says he loves me, that he'll never raise his hand again or lock me away or tie me up, when he promises to treat me like a human being, that's when the tears flow. It's funny how I always believe it for a moment. I feel a pain in my chest that I think is love, before remembering it's just a cigarette burn, a new scar forming over an old scar forming over an older scar, the raw skin brushing against the inside of my shirt.

Even now, hearing him ask for forgiveness almost makes me believe he cares again, that it's another start of a new life for us. I think about kneeling to say a prayer of thanks, but the little slices he cut into my knees make kneeling down impossible.

Rule Number Two: No Praying.

It made him nervous. He looked at me as if he really believed it worked. If I prayed long enough and wished hard enough, maybe it would come true. Maybe I'd be taken out of this house and away from him. He said it made me look like a child wishing on a star for some pathetic dream, that I was wasting my time. I said, you're probably right.

I try to encourage him often. To agree and submit. That's what keeps me alive. And of course, not breaking the rules. He says the rules are there to protect me. It's when rules aren't followed that people get hurt. Without them, you wouldn't know why you're being punished. You'd think the slaps and punches were just for his amusement.

Breaking the rules lands me in here. I'm sitting on the floor in the corner of this small room staring at the spot on the wall that used to be a window. The wooden boards defend against any ray of sunlight attempting to enter.

I usually pace around the room to keep myself busy. I'm supposed to think about why I force him to do this, why I draw the anger out of him. But the pain in my foot is getting worse and I can't stand for too long. Spots of red already seeped up to the surface of the thick cloth. The bandage is actually a ragged strip torn from my favorite wool sweater. Not much of it is left now, just the right sleeve and part of the collar. The soft fabric feels so soothing against the cuts and scratches.

I need a distraction from the throbbing ache so I slide over a few inches, exposing the loose floor board near the wall. I pry up the board by the small knot hole and pull out the box hidden underneath, bringing it close to my chest. Already I feel safer, calmer, with the old jewelry box cradled in my arms. My mother gave it to me just before I left, her idea of a wedding present. I'm not sure why she thought I needed it. But now it holds something more valuable than any jewelry I was never given.

Inside the box is my toe.

Rule Number Three: Never Talk Back.

The way you end up with a toe hidden in a box is this: defend yourself. Tell him you can't take it anymore, that you're leaving and never coming back. Pick up the phone as if you might call the police this time. Scream until your

lungs ache. Unload the entire nightmare of a marriage in one long string of obscenities and threats. Stand up to him for just that one moment, ignoring the inevitable flood of pain you know will wash over you when you're done, when the storm quiets down and he takes back control. It will be worth it. It always is.

This prison was once a nursery. At least that was the idea. I have a blurry memory of the two of us planning it. A pink wallpaper border still lines part of the wall just below the ceiling. I trace the edge with my eyes like it's a timeline of our lives together. The beginning is flawless. The little cartoon animals look so happy and carefree. Near the other end of the wall, the paper is torn and shredded where the glue wasn't strong enough to withstand his anger. He used to say it was just in his blood, that he couldn't help it, back when he still felt the need to explain himself to me. His father made him that way, he'd say. It was just something I'd have to get used to.

I can't resist another look so I lift the lid of the box to see if the bandage needs changing. Another strip from the wool sweater is wrapped around my toe to keep it safe. I once read that when the wool is sheared off it's full of lanolin that acts as an antibiotic. They squeeze this fat and grease from the wool and use it in creams and ointments. The lanolin is long washed away before the wool ever becomes a sweater. At least that's what they say. But they never felt the soothing touch of the fabric on an open sore. How it cools the pain down to a dull, distant throb, like a mother's kiss on a scraped knee. Or how it fills the space between the other toes, making you forget the bloody stub left behind.

Pain for me is not the way most people think of it. It's a part of my life, intertwined within my everyday routine, the way going to work or reading the newspaper is a part of any normal day for other people. To truly feel something, you need to compare it to an opposite feeling. The frozen air of a late winter morning bites at your skin after you walk out of your warm, cozy home. It's the change, the deviation from normal that arouses your senses. My pain is always there. It never leaves or changes. I've learned to deal with it.

That day was the exception.

He tied me to the bed and left the room, letting the mystery boil inside me. I knew he needed to top himself this time. I took away his dignity, his control over my actions during those few moments when I said everything I wanted to say to him for years.

I knew he wouldn't kill me though, and that's what scared me in those moments while I wiggled my hands around waiting for him to come back, the abrasive rope shaving tiny patches of skin from my wrists. For the first time in so long I felt real fear, wondering how he would not kill me. How he would try to bring me to that fine line between life and death, only to pull me back into an existence worse than any hell that awaited me.

I immediately recognized the object he held in his hands when he returned to the bedroom. In a former life I rather enjoyed gardening, sitting in the sun on a spring day, planting a new bed of flowers and waiting for those first buds to push up through the soil. I accumulated a collection of tools over many years and was quite proficient in using them. So my stomach lurched when I saw the blade of the pruning shears glinting in the light from the dresser lamp as he walked by. Before he ever got near the bed I knew that I was about to experience a whole new kind of pain.

The important thing to remember about pruning shears is to keep them razor

sharp. Even the small variety, small enough to fit in your pocket, can cut through a tree branch the diameter of a nickel. You may need to put a little muscle into it, but it'll cut. And never leave them out in the rain. The rust dulls the blades all to hell.

He knelt at the foot of the bed and from this distance I could tell the shears saw many rainy days.

He took a long time deciding which one would go. I felt his rough fingers sifting through my toes like he was deciding which piece of chocolate to eat first out of the box, giving each one a squeeze.

When the cold blades finally wrapped around one of my middle toes I squirmed my hands around, hoping to build up enough pain in my wrists to divert my senses away from the new pain. He began to squeeze the handles, the rusty blades trying mightily, and finally succeeding, at penetrating the skin. I think I actually shocked him with how loud I screamed. He looked up at my face, surprised at first, but then satisfied that he achieved such a reaction from me. I considered begging him to stop, but before I pushed the thought to my mouth he squeezed again. I pulled my arms so hard from the headboard I thought the rope might pull the skin off my hands like a glove.

All those techniques and tricks for dealing with pain that I developed over the years all went out the window as the edge of those blades pressed against the small bone in my toe. The grating sound vibrated through my entire body like getting a tooth drilled. He twisted the shears around as he squeezed harder, apparently having trouble cutting through.

I passed out just after I heard the metal clap of the two blades closing shut.

The television woke me up sometime later that day. He lets me watch it after the really bad punishments. My hands were untied and my foot was wrapped in gauze. Spikes of pain sliced up through my body and pounded against the inside of my skull. I felt too weak to move or peek at the gore beneath those bandages. I tried to focus on the television. Some people debated whatever topic made headlines that day. In between the throbs of pain I heard snippets of a conversation.

"...an abomination of the creation of life..."

"...of course there's nothing wrong with it. It's not evil. It's progress..."

"...science gone mad..."

Eventually I realized the subject of the discussion. Somewhere far away in a lab in some other country, far from my world that exists only in this house, away from the pain and misery and forgotten dreams, a team of scientists cloned a sheep.

From the video clip of the animal running around a barn, I could tell she was happy.

I'm back in my room sitting in the corner clutching the box in my arms. A smile forms on my face, something I used to think could never happen again. I peek inside the box, unable to resist another look. The tiny appendage, now independent of my body, looks so feeble yet holds so much hope. It's the new beginning I've been waiting for. My second chance.

New Rule: What's Good for the Sheep is Good for Me.

Maybe one day those scientists will decide it's time to try a human. I'll get it out somehow. I'll figure out a way. A box will arrive on someone's desk, someone that might see the value of what's inside.

From that box, to a test tube and then to a womb, that toe will be born again. She'll be free. She'll live in a happy home where people laugh and smile and care for each other. She'll fall in love with the perfect man and he'll cherish her. She'll have dreams that come true. She'll become a doctor or teacher or lawyer. She can be anything.

That goddamn toe will be the first female president.