

It started in 2006, and that time it had been an accident. She'd gone to a bowling alley to celebrate a classmate's birthday. Chelsea, the birthday girl, had complimented her dress; said she liked the straps. One of the first times she'd dare leave the house without sleeves. Some of the boys had procured wine coolers. She felt happy, accepted, more than a little warm in the head. Earning her stripes in advanced merrymaking, a friend said. She'd lined up to sail a 12-pounder down the lane but released too soon; the ball landed on the largest toenail of her right foot, leaving it a mosaic of blues, browns, and purples. It remained so for nine months before the old stain was pushed out with new growth. So for nine months she needed only to look at her toe to remember what had been the best day in her life thus far.

A friend played her a mix tape a few nights ago. "A mix tape? Are you serious?" He said it was very old but thought she might appreciate some of the songs. Mazzy Star's "Fade Into You", Duran Duran's "Come Undone", Pink Floyd's "Hey You", Candlebox's "Far Behind", Charlie Parker's "Ornithology", Sarah McLachlan's "Possession", Nine Inch Nails' "Something I Can Never Have", The Pixie's "Where is My Mind?", and Goo Goo Dolls' "Name". In the latter was a lyric that reminded her that "scars are souvenirs you never lose / the past is never far". She smiled as she sipped the wine he'd brought, absentmindedly running her fingers over the skin of her left arm, feeling the bumps and patches and lines of razors, knives, and in one spot, a curling iron. No, her past was never far, now was it? Later, when the music faded and the wine was finished, the friend asked her if she would like to offer him dessert, but she thought of the boy with effortless fashion and hair to match, and said no. She gave him his tape and showed him to the door.

Today, he smiled at her in the breakroom. The boy with effortless fashion and hair to match. Timothy Donovan, in Accounts Payable. Timothy smiled at her as they passed each other through the door, on his way to get his noon-time snack: a bag of baby carrots and a 14oz bottle of Naked Just Orange Juice. Just a smile. It wasn't much, but it was the moon and stars and the clouds that clung to the underbelly of Mount Olympus. It was a thousand and thirty-seven trumpets at the base of the tallest skyscraper. It was fireworks, parades, skywriting, music from another room, driving at 83 miles per hour with the windows down at 3:23 in the morning. She felt the rose of her heart opening to drink his sunlight. She immediately coveted this feeling; this emotion attached to this memory. She'd be damned to have it soiled or weakened by a bad day or a new payroll hours procedure or a flu or a poor return come tax time. She needed to keep this for as long as possible.

Now, her issue is not one of aim or execution but rather a nagging question of "why", as though some part of her recognizes the pathos in this strange act. She shrugs it off as she squares a ballpeen hammer above the smallest toe of her left foot. Her balance is a bit shaky as she's stretched in an awkward runner's stance in her living room, her pastel summer dress a memory of a girlhood buried by teen angst and peer pressure. She lines up the hammer and lets it fall with little more than gravity. She winces as a white, warm pain traverses her leg and creeps into her heart. As her neurons tell her that her toe has been struck with enough force to bruise it, her brain paints that information in hues of nostalgia. She smiles, remembering his smile; knowing that she won't forget it for the next 6 to 7 months, thanks to mini Van Gogh blooming on her tiniest toe.

And this is how she learned to win The Hurting Game.