

Life Victim

The skin on her cheek was bruised, swollen, purple. Her eye was a narrow slit—Spider knew the woman was awake only because her other eye, the uninjured one, tracked movement. She lay still on her bunk, but rose on one elbow when Spider approached.

“Hey, whatcha in for?” Spider asked...the opening line that greeted all new inmates. Spider stood next to the bunk, looking down at the woman laying there.

“Shot my husband.” The old woman remained still on the bunk. “And if he hits me again, I’d shoot him again.”

“So you didn’t kill him?”

“Nah,” The old woman slowly heaved herself fully upright. She scootched to the side of the bunk and let her legs dangle. “Wasn’t tryin’ to *kill* him. Jus’ wanted him to stop hittin’ me.”

“What the hell you guys fightin’ about?” What was this old woman doing in here anyway? She didn’t resemble any of the other inmates in this jail; most of them were young, poor, street-wise and predominantly Black, just like Spider. There were Hispanic too, but this old woman was Anglo. She was frumpy, overweight and tired-looking. Her pale skin was wrinkled and blotchy; her frizzy thin, yellowed, silver-gray hair barely covered the skin of her scalp. Spider could easily picture her in a run-down suburban house, scrubbing toilets, doing laundry and watching soap operas.

Spider checked her out, noticing the old woman’s body was marked up with older bruises, scabs and scars.

“What we *fightin’* about? What we *ever* fight about? I dunno. His drinkin’. My drinkin’. Supper’s not ready. Or his damn food’s too *cold*, or too *spicy*, or not *spicy enough*. The house is

dirty, or his *laundry*'s not done. Or he can't find his stupid *tools*. Don't really remember. We're *always* fightin...about nothin' really...just fightin'.

Spider pondered this for a moment. She looked around the jail dormitory. Blue-jumpsuit-clad women milled about. Some lay on their bunks. Chita and Peppy were finishing cleaning the bathroom stalls, dragging a dirty mop and bucket over to the laundry sink for emptying. The daily Hearts competition was underway at the day tables, and a small crowd had gathered around to watch. An ancient black and white television blared static and *novelas* in the TV room. Up in their office the guards were engaged in their daily paperwork behind the armored glass.

"How long you been married?"

"Nineteen years," the old woman said in her cigarette-raspy voice. Spider could tell by the yellowing hair and brown-stained teeth that the woman smoked too much. "Married him when I was 22."

"You only 41?!!" Spider's voice rose sharply at the end of her question.

The woman nodded.

"Damn!" Spider's head bobbed down and up again. "I took you about sixty!" She paused. "You work?"

The woman shook her head. "He don' *let* me work. Says a woman's place is in the home." She lowered her head, as if looking Spider in the eye was too painful.

Spider wanted to shake her. "Woman! It's 2011! We can do what we want! You *ever* have a job?"

"Did once. Waited tables down at the Boswick. When Sam found out, he came in, broke the boss' nose and dragged me out. Beat me up. Was in the hospital the whole time *he* was in jail."

“Why you get back with him?” Spider demanded. “Why you get back after he put you in the *hospital*?”

The woman hung her head. “Nowhere else to go,” she barely whispered.

Spider was visibly shaken. “Any kids?” Her voice was softer, gentler.

The woman shook her head. “Got pregnant once. Lost the baby after Sam pushed me down the stairs. Never got pregnant again.” She was quiet for a moment. “Guess its just as well. Probably wouldn’t be the best mom.” She gave a half-hearted little laugh.

Silence descended. The activity which surrounded them hummed in the background. An occasional card could be heard slapping the table. Spanish and English conversations faded in and out of conscious awareness. Spider couldn’t think what to say. *Her* man raised his hand to her, once. Spider caught his arm in mid-air and through clenched teeth threatened to remove certain body parts while he slept. He never tried again. Spider preferred girls anyway. Less of a power differential.

“What’d they charge you with?” Spider thought about her own charge: simple possession. Since it was only her second offense, she might get off with just probation. With the prisons overcrowded, they were releasing all the non-violent offenders. She’d maybe get a few months at the most. Then she could get out and go to college. It was her dream, and after being in here again, she was ready to make changes in her life so she’d never have to return. She knew if she stayed clean and worked hard, she could turn her life around.

“Assault with a deadly weapon...second offense. Probably do time. At least have a place to stay, and won’t have to worry about Sam for ‘while. If I’m here, or they send me to Chowchilla, won’t have to visit him in Donovan.”

“Why doncha get out and go away from here? There’s plenty of programs, ain’t there?”

“Tried, once. Went clear over to Nevada. But I call Sam ’cause it got lonely, and he talk me into comin’ back. He made me a lot of promises, and I believed him. Guessa made a mistake. But I love him! And he loves me, least he say so all the time.”

“Woman, that ain’t love,” Spider shook her head. “That’s *possession*. He *owns* you, and you let him.”

The old woman sighed, and lay back down.

Spider looked around and saw another new inmate sitting nervously on a bunk. She shrugged, and walked over.

“Hey, whatcha in for?”