

Criminal

*\*warning: story contains depictions of self-harm and police brutality\**

**Criminal:**

***if drug use was seen as it is, self-harm***

In the passenger's seat of a grey Ford Escape, Mark sat, fidgeting a razorblade between his fingers like a coin trick. He parked in the middle of a Walmart parking lot, away from the streetlights and other cars, facing the opposite direction of any vehicle he was near. Layered in his leather, jean, sweatshirt and flannel outer clothing, he sat in the warmth, never thinking much about his actions anymore. You could find him in the same place, the same clothes, at any hour or any time of day and year, with any person who wanted the same release as he did. Mark is a cutter. Tonight, it was cold. Tonight, he was alone. The time never mattered to him. It didn't seem like a time where shoppers and security would be prevalent anyway. Mark waited.

He took one more look around the parking lot before halting his coin trick to a firm grip. Mark then took the zipper of his leather jacket down to part before unbuttoning the jean jacket underneath. He reached the blade under the sweatshirt, through the flannelled sleeve of his left side until he reached where his muscle and forearm met. He used to close his eyes, but he couldn't risk this anymore. Not in this town. Not in this political climate. Mark kept his eyes open as he pressed down hard, slicing his white pale skin multiple times, forming deep red cuts, pain only reflective in the slight moisture of his irises. He didn't think much anymore. It was cold outside and warm in the car, but Mark was numb.

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The War on Self-Harm is in its fifth year. The concerns of addiction and its impact on America's reputation has only increased. The government decided to further regulate in reaction to the epidemics. All self-harm has been fully outlawed in the United States.

Since the establishment of The War on Self-Harm, there are more people homeless, incarcerated, or institutionalized than ever. Strip searches and profiling based on thinness and scars are not uncommon. Police forces began targeting areas of poverty to meet the increase of cop quotas, knowing where there was less money, there was less food, and there was more reason to suspect someone of an eating disorder, at the very least. And the reality of this all was not uncommon for Mark.

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Mark didn't know how much time had passed, still sitting in the car. The time never mattered to him. There still weren't any shoppers or security that he could see, but there were cars visible. He was sure if he waited around long enough, someone would reveal themselves to be inquisitive of him. Maybe a cop would knock on his window, or a housewife would question why he parked the way he did, why he hadn't gone inside the Walmart to browse or purchase something.

The firm grip of the silver razorblade turned back into a coin trick. Mark licked the blood off of the edge and off of his cold hands before placing it in the small opening of his brown leather wallet. He put the wallet in his jean pant pocket so if his solitude was threatened, he could grab it quickly.

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Mark drove the vehicle onto the highway, feeling the residual puncture stings of his left forearm. It felt good. Good, yet, unbalanced. But he couldn't risk stopping in another parking lot. He couldn't risk waiting. What if somebody was following him?

He would go home if he had a home. But his partner Bentley stopped desiring the same release as Mark a long time ago. Bentley used to cut himself too. But as soon as the War on

Self-Harm became a reality, Bentley started to fear all of his own desires. This new fear halted both his love for cutting as well as his love for Mark. And if Mark spent the money he used for razor blades on the rent instead, he would have more say in what was his after the separation. The blade prices never went up, but money has never been a threat to addiction.

Mark would call someone to crash at their place, one of the any-persons, a fellow cutter, even a bulimic, anyone who desired a release. But anyone he knew of was locked up or under watch these days.

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Surveillance was another regulation associated with The War on Self-Harm. If an individual was ever caught cutting, starving themselves, throwing up, or self-harming in any way, the police force would have at least one car parked at or near the person's location at all times. Trackers, taking the form of ankle bracelets, were used so that task forces always knew who to look for and where to look for them. There were regulations on home environments as well. Kitchen knives, pointed edges of tables, anything with sharp penetrating capabilities were outlawed. The goal was control.

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Mark's dealer Rosie was the only person in his life he could think of contacting for a place to stay, and she called him the other day from an unknown number. Mark almost didn't answer as he never normally answers unknown numbers, especially ones with the same area code as his hometown. It was too risky. But he didn't think much anymore.

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"Mark," she said, "I know you don't want to talk buddy, but you have to listen to me."

"What is it Rosie? I can't buy any blades. I don't have any money."

“That’s not it. You don’t want the shit I have today anyway. They’re rusted.”

“Rosie, I can’t be on the phone like this, they could be watching. Or listening.” Mark said.

“Mark. I’m in the city. And they’ve started strip searching people again. They’re searching for scars. For cutters like us. Taking off shirts, socks, everything man. It’s bad.”

“I know. Everything’s getting worse.”

“I’m just warning you. You have to find some place to stay, man. It’s not safe out there. Especially the way you look. They see boney, and they’ll think you haven’t been eating on purpose either. You have to find a place. Being locked up will only make it worse, you know that.”

“I know that.”

“You have to find a place. And you know I’d offer up mine, but my parents know about your history and....”

“I know. I get it,” Mark said.

“They’re oblivious. I just can’t risk them knowing about me too. I-I can’t...”

“I get it Rosie,” Mark hung up.

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While driving, the time got away from Mark. The time never mattered to him. The warmth in the car was now hot. He found himself slowly removing his leather layer off his boney ghostly body, completely this time, while he was driving. Like the Walmart parking lot, the highway was almost vacant. He flinched at passing streetlights. What time was it? It didn’t seem like a time where commuters and cops would be prevalent anyway. He continued removing the layer.

A car flew past him and he flinched harder, almost turning the steering wheel into the brick wall barrier to his right. He took one more look at the open road before unbuttoning his jean jacket and slowly removing it, entirely this time as he did the leather layer, tossing both outer clothing pieces to the passenger's seat. Another car and another flinch, but Mark grabbed the wallet in his jean pant pocket, placing it on his right leg to rest. He waited. His eyes shot back and forth fast, from the road to the bloodied rust edge of the blade peering out of the small opening of his brown leather wallet. Mark could feel the stinging on his left forearm subsiding, and he started to shake. He just wanted more. He just wanted to feel balanced. He just wanted that release.

Mark looked at his empty arm with longing a little too long until his eyes shot up, realizing he was turning the steering wheel toward the brick wall barrier to his right again. But this time, he didn't look around to see what was around. He didn't see the exit for the city. And he didn't see the red, white and blue lights in the distance behind him. He just pulled over and parked on the right side of the highway.

With his cold hands he reached the blade under the sweatshirt, through the flannelled sleeve of his right side this time. He reached where his muscle and forearm met and pressed down, cutting as hard as he could. This time, he closed his eyes. This time, he didn't question where his car was parked and the brick wall barrier halted as a liability. All he could think about was getting the sweatshirt over his head, so he could press down on his right side harder, slicing skin multiple times. He wanted the evenness. He wanted the balance. He wanted warmth. He wanted to feel.

He opened his eyes to Officer Martin's spotlight blinding him.

“What the hell you think you’re doin’? Are you crazy parkin’ on the side of the road like this in the middle of the night?”

Mark came to.

“License and registration. What’s your reasonin’ for bein’ here at this hour?” Officer Martin said.

But Mark could not move. Mark didn’t know what time it was.

“Are you deaf? Step out of the vehicle.”

Mark slowly reached the blade backwards under the sweatshirt, and through the flannelled sleeve. The bloodied rust edge of the silver blade between his pointer finger and thumb caught Officer Martin’s flashlight.

Officer Martin radioed, “We got ourselves another cutter junkie. Skinny as hell, probably an anorexic too. I need backup. I think I’ve run into this kid a couple times and the asshole hasn’t learned his lesson yet.”

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This wasn’t the first time Mark got caught by the police. This wasn’t the first time he’d been beaten outnumbered by them either. Just the blade in Officer Martin’s spotlight view would have been enough evidence to take Mark down to the station in a court of law. Just being parked on the side of the road would have been enough evidence to take Mark down to the ground in the court of cop quotas. If he was any other skin color or gender the cops would have used their guns for their purpose instead of for bashing Mark’s body with more bruises. That’s just the way it was for addicts. That’s just the way it was in this political climate. It was the reality of The War on Self-Harm.

Mark used to close his eyes during the beatings. But the majority of cops based their work in corruption and cruelty these days. These cops could sense any pain they could get off on, craving that release, even pain behind closed eyes. Mark couldn't risk this vulnerability anymore. Not in this town. Not in this political climate. Mark watched as they beat him hard, multiple times, before stripping him of all his layers. The headlights of Mark's car and the headlights of the cop vehicles revealed Mark was tattooed in scars, skin and bone. The headlights revealed the progressive bruising and bludgeoning by hands not his own. And all Mark could hear was laughter. They made Mark lick the blood off of the edge of the street before throwing him in the small opening that was the cop car door. It was cold outside as Officer Martin's rearview mirror reflected Mark's stone expression. Mark could hear the cops cackling their mocking banter. It was cold in the back of the cop car. But Mark was numb.

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On the left side of a twin bed bottom bunk of a grey cement jail cell, Mark sat, fidgeting his fingers. The cell was vacant like the Walmart parking lot and the highway at certain times that never mattered to him. He was facing the barred window, away from others like him. You could find him in the same place at any hour or time of day. He traced the marks where his muscles and forearms met with his boney fingers. He pressed down hard with his thumb when no one was looking. Mark flinched and quickly adjusted as others like him entered the room and passed his bunk. They tossed around rusty contraband that would sometimes catch the sunlight from the barred off window and reflect into their eyes. They revealed themselves to be inquisitive of him, asking questions, cackling banter, like cops. But all Mark could think about was how cold he was, pain only reflective in the slight moisture of his irises. Mark waited.