

Mapping the Territory

by Jane Hammons

Thighs. That's where she'd made her first mark. Just a girl then. Ten, eleven, twelve. The years before the blood came monthly. Unable to wait, she carved her own language of love into the tree that was her body.

Those were the ones they always found first. And just like every man before him, and a few women, too, this one traced the little scars with his fingertips. Murmuring tenderly—as if she desired his healing touch—he pushed her skirt up and said the things they all said. How did this happen? Can I kiss and make it better?

She was a girl who showed her Indian, that's what her grandma always said. Her grandma showed her Indian, too, mostly to the bottom of a fifth of Jack Daniels. They were some part Cherokee, some part Chickasaw—a half, a fifth, a third—the fraction wasn't important if your skin was dark, your hair black. Back home when she was a girl showing your Indian meant you got showed the door. It meant you might freeze to death by the side of the railroad tracks high on the fumes of the liquid whiteout you stole from the boss's supply cabinet. Back home showing your Indian meant move to a big city. Someone will find you beautiful.

Hunapo wasn't the first, but he was the first she loved. In Maori his name meant hidden darkness. When he discovered she didn't know the meaning of hers, the journey began.

What she had begun with a box cutter and the dull blades of her grandmother's old Swiss Army knife, Hunapo perfected with his sharper more efficient ones. He used hooks to lift and fold so that when the wounds healed the scars rose, a beautiful outcropping, along the surface of her skin. When he was finished with her, she would know everything she needed to know. But like so many people

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she knew, Hunapo was illegal, on the run. Busted and disappeared, he left her incomplete, a draft, undone.

She went wherever city work took her and filled her days: typing and filing; serving and pouring; dancing and teasing. At night she toyed with people like this man and practiced what Hunapo taught her. For without the meaning of her name, she could not die.

When the man saw Indian Territory mapped across her breasts and abdomen, he gasped. She'd quit picking up women, their first response so hard to read. Whether or not they wanted to proceed, they always wanted to know why.

But a man is like a primer. This one still had his hard-on. Eagerly he followed the rivers—Neosho, Washita, Verdigris—with his tongue. But as with so many others, his interest flagged when across her back, he encountered the scars Hanupo had packed with the ashes of her dead grandmother. Mountain ranges—Ozark, Ouachita, Cerbat, Wasatch—emerged along her spine and across her buttocks.

She pitied him. He'd come so far, only to flounder in the rough terrain.

"I don't mind the scars," he said, trying to convince himself, desperate to continue the journey but unable to make the climb.

She rolled him onto his back and straddled him, folding what was left of his desire inside her. She pulled her big Bowie knife from the sheath beneath her pillow, "You don't mind the scars?" She taunted him with his declaration and made the cut. First blood a sweet rush to the surface. She waited for the flow to clear the wound, the blush of skin, wanting, like lips, its first kiss. She could work it then, folding and tucking, packing skin with what she had at hand—bits of thread, cigarette ashes, strands of hair—mapping the territory to her own hidden darkness.

