

# This Is Who I Am

by Paul de Denus

The tattoo sets the base of her spine, hands that spread above the dimples, hip to hip, fingers furrowed together expanding the curve, the two thumbs spread, touching each other tip to tip where it forms the shape of a winged W. Her skin is like fine leather - that late-teen type - baby fat with a slight rivulet pattern. *Tack, tack, tack*; the oscillating unit hums; my fingertips barely caress the naked surface that I punch into. *Tack, tack, tack*; the ink inserts into the skin, courtesy of a single needle, courtesy of my light touch.

She's already told me too much information; the younger ones always do, her ex-boyfriend mean, drank too much. And ugly. He had scars, says he was once handsome until he came back damaged from some sand war. I can see her eagerness as she tells me this. It's her way of diminishing the hurt he laid upon her. Maybe she sees a bit of me in him - him in me - in my face where the scars of youth smatter my cheeks like a rogue disease. I know the rejection; I don't feel the hurt. That's for another day. The hurt. My art is enough. I leave my mark on the skin, my hold on their bodies, indelible in my memory.

She tells me the first thing her ex said when he got back from his war was how fat she'd gotten. Was it that easy to let herself go? He was drunk when he told her. Alcohol abuse really can get one's mouth running. She's waiting for me to say something, like no, he was wrong about her weight. She's waiting for the attention, the needy desire to support her fragile self-image and that's perfect for me; I'll give her some of that but not all. She hasn't figured out yet that I'm in control.

It was easy to convince her of the tattoo, the desirable hands flanking her hips. I told her it was sexy. She bought it, literally and figuratively. Then I told her the boyfriend was right, that she should

lose some weight. I said it matter of fact, with an easy non-judgmental confidence. Was she offended? Maybe. It didn't matter. Right now I am the only guy paying attention to her and that seems to be enough. Perhaps she identifies with the weight issue I share with her. We're kindred spirits. All my victims are. I can't help but flash a chip-chinned grin. I have no problem calling them my victims. Here is where they've put themselves. It's what they are.

*Tack, tack, tack.* My fingers touch her side, the meaty part just above the hip and I press ever so lightly. She doesn't realize she's caught her breath, just a hitch. It's a moment of anticipation. I've heard it before. Does she think this is the start of the seduction? That my fingers will start to travel? Am I the first man to touch her in a long time? Oh I know I am. I'm not interested in her that way. I just don't want to spoil the mood, not when I'm working. *Tack, tack, tack.*

I wipe the inked area with a clean cloth. My hand inks out the shading along the finger's edging where the colors sit nicely. The special blend ink has medicinal characteristics. A powerful numbness will begin with my final injections. I will place my hands on the perfect hands I created but she won't feel them; she won't feel anything. The paralysis will set in and she will be silent like the others. Then I can decide on the cutting shape and how I'll frame it.

I am a true artist, the worst kind. I can't seem to let go of my work. I make no apologies. This is who I am.

