

# A Survivor's Tale

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Inspired by my friend and her struggles.

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He sat on top of her, legs and body raised just slightly above her hips, so as not to crush her with his weight. He was leaning forward, holding her arms over her head. She was afraid to look him in the eyes, her face red, eyes tearing up. "Please don't", she whimpered. It was barely audible. "Yes baby, please. It's okay. It's time. I love you." "No, I can't" "It's nothing to be ashamed of. It is who you are." She looked at him. Her blonde hair tousled, eyes bloodshot. Tears flowing down the sides of her face. "It's not who I was!" "You are still the same person." He leaned down to kiss the tears away. She turned her head, resisting. He looked at the white shirt she was wearing. In the 8 months they had been lovers, he had never once seen her without a shirt. She refused to shower with him, bathe with him. Be naked with him. Even when they made love. He released a hand. She hit him. "Don't!" "I'm sorry baby. I have to. I have to see what they did to you." "No! No! No!" She cried, louder and more adamantly. "I don't want to lose you!" He said nothing. He only reached for the top button. She was crying hard now. Her words not audible, if they were even words that she was trying to speak. But she had stopped fighting. She had accepted it. Now the second button was undone. Her shirt still covered her. The third. He moved back to give himself access to the other buttons. Fourth. Fifth. Her eyes were blank. There was still no resistance and he now used both hands to undo the sixth, and last button. She drew in a breath and held it, still looking off to the side. Refusing to look at him. He continued to look at her. Slowly he moved both hands to the top of the shirt. She closed her eyes, tight, causing the tears to flow hard and fast. Slowly he peeled the shirt away, starting from the top. Exposing her pale-white skin, then gradually, two thin, raised pink lines, vertical on each side of her chest. Moving downwards. Exposing more skin. She was shaking, sobbing uncontrollably. More. Her chest. The scars, still continuing downward. Where nipples used to be. Should still be. Further down. The scars ending just above her belly. He stared at the gross disfiguration. Tears welled up in his eyes. This beautiful woman, inside and out. Her body desecrated as a result of disease. The scars reminded him of autopsy sutures. In fact, part of her had died. "I love you baby." He whispered and leaned in to kiss her face. Any part of her face. Every part of her face. He wanted to kiss her soul. Kiss away her pain. Her sobs got louder. His kisses continued. "You are so beautiful". "How the fuck can you say that? How can you possibly mean that? Look at me!! I have no breasts! I'm not a real woman!" She started banging her fists against his chest. Crying. He reached down and grabbed her

arms, pulling them over her head. He stared into her teary eyes. His tears falling onto her face, mixing with hers. "It doesn't change a thing as far as I'm concerned." He leaned towards her, covering her body with his. Protecting her from the world. She bit her lip. "I'm in this for the long haul." Leaning on his elbows, he sought out her lips, but she turned away. He insisted. She refused. He kissed her cheek, tasting the saltiness of their tears. She looked into his eyes, trying to see behind them. To see the revulsion his brain certainly must be feeling for her at this moment. All she saw was tenderness. The warmth of his eyes that she had seen so many times before. And tears. The smallest of smiles on his lips. She did not understand. Why hadn't he run from her? Maybe it was only a matter of time before he would sneak out the door, never to be heard from again. "I'm not going anywhere", he said, as if he had been reading her mind. \*\*\* Eighteen months ago, her world was perfect. She was working at her dream job. On her own again after a disastrous marriage. Financially, she was making headway. Her house was comfortable. Her children grown and on their own. There were men in her life, although they all seemed afraid to be more than just casual friends, or friends with benefits. She dressed, optimistic about the upcoming appointment. She had been in remission for 3 years. She considered herself lucky. The cancer was removed with a "simple" lumpectomy. She had caught it early. Looking in the mirror one last time, she admired her cleavage. "Not bad for a woman my age with 2 kids. Still a firm 34D." She told her kitties to be good. She would be home soon. The door closed behind her. \*\*\* She was in a fog. The TV on, but she wasn't paying attention. Rain spattered the living room window next to her chair. She was oblivious to it. An empty wine glass sat on the end table. She had long given up drinking from it. She held the bottle, pulling it towards her tear-streaked face, drinking directly from it. An empty bottle lay on the floor. "It's not good news. Your blood count is up. The cancer is back." Doctor Nathan's words echoed in her brain. Playing over and over like a broken record. "I think we should schedule a mastectomy." She vomited on the floor. Not even trying to get up. Her bile purplish, like the wine. Putrid. \*\*\* It was one of the first warm days of spring. She looked up at the sun, feeling its warmth on her face. She watered the various plants on her patio with a sprinkle can. Turning attention to her trail bike, she oiled the chain, tested the brakes. Checked the tire pressure. She was looking forward to taking her bike out on the desert trails and seeing new life starting to spring forth from the ground. The move to Arizona was good for her, she thought. The weather was mild. There was lots of sunshine. She needed that – the grey dreary days back east, depressed her. Worse than she already was. The constant overcast made it more difficult to survive the chemo and radiation. Here, she could spend more time outdoors. Hiking. Biking. Exploring new places. Maybe she would try to find the petroglyphs she had found a few months ago. Peddling over the rocks and loose dirt was exhilarating. The constant struggle to keep the bike upright. To avoid the pain of falling on jagged shale, some as sharp as razors. The wind in her face, her hair, tied back into a pony tail, occasionally bounced on her upper back. Prairie dogs scurried about, gathering what food they could find. She startled as she rounded a corner, breaking and turning to avoid hitting the man. He looked as stunned as she did. The bike skidded and she started to go down. The man reached and grabbed her arm, keeping her from falling full force onto her bike. At least for a moment. Her fall threw him off balance. They both landed on the hard desert floor. "Are you okay?" they seemed to ask

simultaneously, each sitting up, brushing dirt and pebbles from their clothing and arms. She looked at him and saw his blue eyes, still open wide from the shock. Her green eyes were equally wide. "I'm so sorry." She said. "I guess I was going too fast for that turn. I just didn't expect anyone else to be out here." "That's okay. I'm glad you didn't get hurt. Or me for that matter" he chuckled quietly. Then an awkward silence. He stood, offering her his hand. "Here, let me help you up. Are you sure you're okay?" "Yea, I'm fine." He looked at her – brownish blonde hair, just past her shoulders. Green eyes. Her lips seemed to form a permanent pout. Her figure was slim, her hips well-formed. Her chest seemed too flat for the rest of her figure. "What?" she blushed as she caught him staring. "I'm sorry. I just realized how attractive you were." He was blushing as well. He helped pick up the bike and held it steady as she climbed on. "Do you come here often?" he asked, suddenly realizing the cheesiness of his words. She laughed. "First you knock me off my bike, then you try to pick me up? What next? Are you a serial killer of something?" She was mocking him. "Hardly. Usually I'm a speed bump." She laughed and pedaled away. The rest of the ride was uneventful, although her thoughts kept going back to the blue eyes looking down at her as he helped her off the ground. Arriving home, she decided a coffee was in order. She showered, threw on a pair of jeans and sweat shirt, and without bothering to put on make-up, headed out the door. Standing in line, she surveyed the menu. Perhaps a latte? "Come here often?" She spun and found herself looking into those blue eyes again. \*\*\* She lay there, curled up in a ball. Her hand across her chest holding her shirt closed. Dried tears streaked her face, her eyes red and swollen. His arms were still around her, she stared at the wall. She hadn't slept. She knew it was only a matter of time and she would never see him again. She felt him stir. He nuzzled her neck. "Good morning, sunshine." He kissed her neck. She felt all of him against her. A while later, he was in the shower. She hadn't moved. With a towel around his waist, he walked towards her and knelt beside the bed. "Hey baby," he kissed her nose, "how about we do something special tonight. I'll call you when I'm on my way over." He kissed her eyelids. She stared at the wall. Her head throbbed from crying and her nose was stuffy. She was still in bed when he called her at lunch. She didn't answer. She knew he was calling to say goodbye. Four o'clock. But what if he did come back? Sluggishly, she walked to the bathroom and showered. At 5:20, the phone rang. "Hello," her voice was sad and weak. "Hey baby, you okay?" "Yea" "Okay, I'll be there in 20." \*\*\* It was a struggle to put on make up. It was a struggle to get dressed. Ten before six, he was at her door. "He wants to let me down easy. In public. Doesn't want a scene." He stood there with flowers – roses of varying colors and big, pink irises. He was smiling. "Heard of a great restaurant downtown. Thought we would check it out." Confused, she took the flowers to the kitchen, as he grabbed a vase. The flowers arranged, he grabbed her hand and pulled her out the door. \*\*\* It was 4 months ago that he had asked her to move in. That night, they made love. Still, she wore her shirt. He showered, turning his face to the warm stream, when he felt hands on his back. Spinning around, she withdrew, crossing her arms across her chest. Smiling down at her, he reached up and took her face in his hands. He kissed her. She kissed him back. She put her arms around him, freeing her chest to him for the first time. She was finally happy. \*\*\* There are no names in this story. It could be about anyone. It is dedicated to those that have survived and find that they are still able to love and be

loved. And to those that can see beyond the physical scars, to see the love that lies within.