

Short Story

Summer Night

The smell of the alcohol was soaked into Karen's breath. What she drank, more often than not, was one of the strongest alcohols. It was the Chinese *Bai-Ju* that used to send Devin's 6'3" father, who never missed a drink in his life, straight to the hospital after only one bottle. Even Devin's alcoholic dad had the sense not to open up the bottle of *Bai-Ju* unless it was with relatives during the Chinese New year. Both Karen and Devin were lying down on their bed, face to face, holding each other at arm's length. Devin, filled with well-controlled, familiarized fear, was holding down her forearms. The rest of Karen's arms were wrapped around his neck, holding a knife in one hand, flinching every once in a while. The gap between them wasn't too large; they could feel each other breathing in and out.

"Let me go. Now," said Karen, chopping up the words so that it sounded even colder. Knowing that she was holding a knife sharper than the look in her eyes behind him, Devin had to let go of the woman for whom he had hidden a ring inside the sock drawer. He started to cry out of fear and hold himself, give a hug to his pathetically weak, fragile body that couldn't stop anything from happening. She was still holding him in the same position. Her big black cat approached, glaring up with its sleek yellow eyes.

"Here kitty, kitty," said Karen, and that was when Devin's hand shot out to hold tightly onto her shoulder, accidentally pushing her a bit.

"What the hell are you doing?" asked Karen, her eyes growing bigger with surprise. She held his back with her free hand.

"Don't hurt the cat, please don't hurt the cat. You love Pluto; you've had him for over five years now. Please don't." Now there were bubbles forming on his nose from all the crying. His already small Asian eyes were almost shut. Karen laughed hysterically, and suddenly stopped and continued.

"I wasn't going to do that."

Pluto jumped on the bed and approached them from behind Devin. Pluto purred softly and started to rub itself kindly against the hand Karen was using to hold the knife. Karen turned the back of the knife toward Pluto and started to scratch against its flow of fur with the cold

metal. Pluto purred again shutting its eyes halfway, enjoying the coolness of it. Both Karen and Devin were covered by their sweat, but Devin was also covered by his own free-flowing snot and streaming tears. Karen's eyes sparkled in self-destructive pleasure, but Devin mistook her smile as a positive sign. He was a bit more relieved by the cat's appearance. He felt the presence of Pluto on his back through the air, which didn't make much sense, he knew, but his sixth-sense felt that Pluto was there, and it comforted him.

He felt the movement of Karen's arm, so he held her arm tighter. Warm blood began to ooze out from her wrist; a line traced the trail of the sharp knife, almost like drawing on it. Blood came dripping, spreading into his sweat soaked white shirt. His first thought was that Karen hurt the cat, but Pluto was purring delightfully. He thought, *come to think of it, Karen's psychotic rage was always directed towards herself and not anyone else.* Pluto was celebrating the unusually lovely summer night by visiting the refreshing breezes wandering through the window -- a night on which both of its owners were awake to play with it. And now there was fresh meat. Karen raised Pluto to be half a street cat that knew how to hunt and half a house cat to be fed. Pluto licked the blood, not off Karen's arm, but off of Devin's shirt. Since the shirt was already soaked wet from his sweat, he could see the movement of the tongue pretty clearly, scraping against his back. Kitty licks are different from those of the puppies; they are not wet cotton candy brushing against the skin, they are more like a million small little needles stuck in a small piece of cotton. Pluto kept purring in pleasure, and Karen's voice was orgasmic with her neckbent backwards a little. She was shivering in pleasing pain— her bleary eyes and long eyelashes were trembling. Devin didn't even blink. He kept his eyes wide open, like someone glued his eyelids in place. His eyes got dry, but he couldn't blink. Blood started to congeal on his shirt and her arms, Pluto started to lick even harder, and Karen made such a satisfied face, breathing peacefully. She fell asleep or passed out. He couldn't tell.

Devin got up taking off his shirt, and throwing it away. He got the emergency kit from the drawer under the night stand and fixed her up temporarily. He checked the depth. It wasn't deep enough to go to the hospital. He went to the bathroom to wash off his hands and soaked the towel with warm, clean water. He washed her off with it, and covered her up to her neck with a blanket. He held her tight once and then took a shower. With lavender, soapy bubbles in his hair,

he thought about how she promised to stop. That next time, she was going to get help. Next time never seemed to come though. Earlier in their relationship, he thought maybe she was taking some kind of drugs, so got her secretly tested few times. She said she was clean, and she was clean. He was thankful for that; like that one promise that she kept proved that there was trust between them. He realized why she covered his back with her hand when he flinched: she was worried that he might get hurt. She *should* have worried that he might get hurt. Karen never seemed to get that. After over five years of being together, Karen still didn't get that she was cutting off a part of him when she was cutting herself. After getting out of the shower he wrapped a white clean towel around his body and stood in front of the window.

He opened up the window fully because the early birds were singing quite delightfully. He sat on the edge of the window grabbing the wall tightly between his thighs. The last few times, Karen stood on this edge barely holding anything else. He pulled one of his legs away from the inside of the wall, sticking his both legs outside, riskily. If she once understood, how it felt, she would stop. Devin wondered how he had let it get this far in five years.

The first time he saw her completely naked, it had nothing to do with sex. She said that she had new wounds. He saw the old cuts on her thighs and arms, colored slightly lighter than her skin. He saw the new cuts, still pink and yet to be healed. Now he understood why she never wore sleeveless tops or short shorts. It looked like a gradation, some kind of beautiful artwork. Old cuts were high up on her arms and the lower they got, the newer the scars were. She was using herself as a canvas.

“You don't have to do this,” said Devin. He placed his thumb on the scars. He cried because as he ran his thumb on top of the scars, they were amazingly soft. The newer the scars, the softer they were. The newest scars, the ones lowest on her arms, felt really soft, like a new, light green leaf budding on the top of a branch.

“This is the one for the day of my sixteenth birthday. Both of my parents forgot. Lucas? My first boyfriend I talked about? He handed me the knife that he used to use.”

Lucas wasn't an amazing musician, but he was one. Every time before he composed a song, he would go to the woods and cut himself. He said the more he bled, the better the song was. It may have been a placebo, but the music usually was better. Lucas was found dead in his

apartment a few years later. Karen knew that it wasn't suicide like the police said it was. Lucas would never actually kill himself; he always wanted to live for the music. He did cut himself, but it was an accident that he died.

“He said that after enough blood flowed out, he got this weird high: a feeling of being free from his physical body. The first time I did, I understood what he was saying. When I do it, it feels like my head is being dissolved into warm, comforting water. I feel the tips of my toes and fingers tingling, like after good sex,” said Karen. Devin didn't know what exactly to do. So he just started to kiss each one of the lines on her body. After each one of the kisses he asked, “When was this?”

Like the annual rings of a tree, each scar had a story.

“You know what Gate Theory is?” asked Karen after half of her story was told.

“Another pain comes along and an existing pain is not felt as much? Yeah,” answered Devin. He continued, “Promise me that you won't do this. I'd rather you cut me than do this to yourself.” She said that she would never hurt him like that. “But you are. Promise me that you will stop this,” said Devin. He considered saying that he would leave if she didn't stop. That would be a lie though. Besides, even to say he did, for Karen, he would be just another scar to make. Or maybe he won't be. Maybe somehow, there was something he could do to change her. After every story was untangled from its line, Karen promised him that she would stop.

He once thought of cutting himself while she was watching. The event got all big and dramatic and she promised, once again, to stop, and he really was determined to cut himself but he just couldn't. He wanted to. He wanted to be the reason, the period of the long sentence of the self-destructive pattern of Karen, so that he could be the hero of her world—the messiah if you would. He wished that he was more fucked up, so he could do that, or understand why Karen had to cut. Or he wished he was less fucked up, enough that he wouldn't feel some sick pleasure from the women that he loves needing him, or so that he could leave her, but he could never do either. Just like right now he couldn't possibly jump on this lovely morning, with the birds singing for him. He was turning back to go inside the building when Pluto decided to jump from the window to catch a bird outside. Pluto was quite a big cat, big enough to knock the unbalanced, skinny, tall, man off the edge of the window. When Pluto jumped off, its tail

touched Devin, and just that much momentum scared Devin enough to get both his feet back inside the building. Pluto didn't succeed in catching the bird, but it did scare them away for a while. Looking out the window again, Devin almost wished that he would find a stack of bloody needles in her drawer so that he could turn away from her now.