

## The Birthmark

All of the people in the club smelled like emptiness, like hollow, like lonely. They tried to cover the scent with showers and bath gels, Irish Spring soap and too much spearmint gum.

The men were mesmerized by the breasts. They stared from rack to rack, likely imagining themselves swinging from them like lower primates from branches. The women had dressed up those breasts, with precision. They were like the overwhelmed homeowner baiting a mousetrap, hoping to catch that which they heard scratching behind the walls. There were support bras, push up bras, lacy bras and even the occasional lawless bralessness. These women knew what they were doing.

Isabel had an advantage. A birthmark. It was the size of her pinky fingertip and it was smack in the middle of her chest. It was close enough to her cleavage that most men couldn't resist the opportunity to look straight at her breasts while pretending to look at the birthmark. She had done experiments, and had noticed the difference between her appeal when she bared it versus when she buried it. She had learned to accentuate it, wearing necklaces that coaxed the eye downward.

She took a slow survey of the dance floor lamenting the poor man-to-woman ratio. Despite her ice-breaking birthmark, based on that ominous ratio plus the disproportionate presence of beautiful women in the crowd, she decided that her best bet was to sidle up to the bar.

Isabel was of two minds. Part of her wanted to meet Mister Right and ride off into the sunset. The other part didn't believe in Mister Right and just wanted Mister Right Touch. In her

fantasies, the two existed in one man. But even a woman of the most vivid fantasy life couldn't think she was going to meet Mister Right in this bar full of lackluster dancers. Those two minds sabotaged her, dueling, each hoping to kill the other. They confused her so much that she didn't know what she wanted, just *that* she wanted.

She ordered a Jack and Coke, and then got closer to the dance floor.

Just as the first wave of looseness began to blur the edges of her tension, someone asked her to dance. She looked up at him, held up the just-a-second-finger, and then slammed back the rest of her drink.

"I don't like to leave my drink unattended," she offered.

He took her hand, firmly and pulled her onto the dance floor.

One song led into the next, and they danced and danced. She grew warmer and could feel the sweat at her hairline. At the first opportunity, she inserted an I'm-grazing-my-fingertips-across-my-chest move, watching him the whole while.

He caught a glimpse of the birthmark; then he looked away.

Disappointed, suddenly she wished she had another drink.

They continued to dance, and she found herself more in sync with his rhythms. He pulled her closer, firmly. Before she could stop herself, she wondered what his hands would feel like on her hips, how strong they would be. She did not imagine him a gentle man. She did not want to stop imagining him.

This was not ladylike.

She looked at his face to find him staring into her eyes. She felt a challenge. She felt a lightning crackle of fear. Singed around the edges, she realized that she wanted to sleep with him.

Isabel had recently been ejected from a romance that she had found quite cozy. Her internal compass was now broken, and she knew it. It didn't stop her from wandering the roads out there, thirsty. *Water? Water?* She figured there would be signs along the way to help her. She put into the back of her established tendency to strip down and jump into the cool oasis only to realize that it was a mirage and to be stuck shaking sand out of her ass for miles as she tried again to find her way.

She had no excuse to sleep with this man and had given herself a pep talk before she left home. She had told herself that she wouldn't go home with anybody, and that she wouldn't bring anyone home. She hadn't gone as far as to say she wouldn't kiss anyone. She had already used her free card after the last breakup using, what she had termed the "eraser hookup." And now, she was supposed to be pulling it all together.

She realized that her thoughts had pulled her off of the beat, inhaled and tried to read this partner's body.

Then she felt a burning in her chest. She concentrated on the sensation and realized that the feeling was somewhere between her ribs and her skin, sort of. That was the entry point of the burning sensation. That was where it stung, but deeper down there was another sensation, like a hot cave, still and dangerous. She brought her hand to her chest and felt at her fingertips a heat unlike anything she had ever touched.

She stopped dancing.

“What’s wrong, Mami?”

She realized that it was the birthmark. She poked at it, as discreetly as possible and found it too hot to touch, even for a second. She wanted to cry, but didn’t. She never did.

“Nothing,” she lied, “Let’s dance.”

He held his hands out; she took them, but something felt different.

While she felt heat at her chest, her extremities started to feel like clouds. It was hard for her to feel that she was even holding his hands. Instead it was as if she had begun to envelop him. She looked at him seeing nothing out of the ordinary, and then she surrendered her body to him and tried to enjoy the dancing.

To her, dancing sometimes felt like riding a carousel. This time she didn’t feel it. She didn't feel anything familiar, the things that she chased when she went to dance. Her lower

extremities began to feel like quicksand, giving her the sensation that she was sinking into herself. Each time her foot struck the floor she was reminded of stepping through something. It was like walking through a snow drift, but warm.

Suddenly it occurred to her that she wanted him to hit her, or grab her roughly and tightly, so hard that she could feel the bones of his fingers pressing her flesh down to the bone. Or, maybe he could knock her to the floor, or bite her, drawing her blood. She wanted him to take possession of her, leave his mark. She wanted him to overpower her.

If she were taken, she wouldn't have to surrender. If he would show her this one mercy, then she would have an excuse for being so broken.

So she pulled him closer, allowing her head to touch his cheek. Their sweat mingled. She inhaled the side of his face, his neck. She scooted in closer to him, close enough to impair his dancing. She wasn't sure if she were playing the snake or the snake charmer. She brought his hands to her waist and danced like she meant to tell him something. They were close enough to each other and so hot that she hadn't noticed the tendrils of steam escaping from that sliver of space between their bodies. She pressed herself closer to him. She looked up at him and found him staring at the birthmark.

She blushed.

This was no ordinary blush. It started at the floor of her internal heat and exploded outward in spurts and waves. She could not rein it in, nor is it likely that she would have if she could. Encouraged by the heat, which she had decided was powerful; she slid her hands up his

back underneath his shirt. She was not deterred by the sweaty slick surface of his skin. She pulled him even closer. Harder. Tighter. Closer. Closer.

Then she felt that burning in her chest. It felt like she was about to erupt. She held onto him even tighter. It felt like someone had intensified the strobe light, turning up its effects until she felt the spastic blinking throughout her body. There was the flicker of overwhelming brightness all around her, recruiting the rest of her body. Her skin felt like it flickered, and then her chest. She looked down at her birthmark which appeared much darker than it ever had before. She continued to dance, pulsing with the music, moving with the lights, but she wasn't trying to. He was still staring at the birthmark. She smiled, satisfied that it hadn't lost its touch and relaxed a little.

Just then, he lifted his hand from her waist and placed his index finger on it.

She heard a sizzling sound, over the music. She felt weakness and fought to keep her eyes open.

Past those heavy lids, she saw his finger begin to disappear. But she looked at his face and saw bliss. He did not move his finger. As more of it appeared to evaporate, he pressed more firmly. She blinked, very slowly her weakness making even the most basic functions require concentration. When she focused on his hand, she saw that the whole thing had vanished, and now that he was pushing into her with his wrist. She watched as he went away, more and more. Through all of that sizzling, it took her a while to recognize that the boiling sensation from before had become much more subdued. She felt for the first time in months that she may again be sated.

He continued to push into her.

She fell to the ground.

When the other people realized that someone had fallen, they looked at her with a half of a man hanging out of her chest and moved away from her, some running straight for the doors, others advancing more slowly wanting to see, but from a distance. With the whole dance floor to herself, along with her growing weakness, she surrendered to the floor, laying there, stretching out. He pressed and pressed until he was fully inside her.

Chaos ensued, screams punctuating the roar of a crowd that had witnessed something it didn't understand. She lay there, oblivious to the din. The lights were undimmed and the bouncers couldn't decide whether it was safe to get near her. Her sweat began to cool, and her body no longer felt like an earthquake. She felt full for the first time in ages, and fatigued. As the tension melted off of her and into a pool around her on the ground, she realized that this feeling is what she had been searching for.