

A word of warning:

There are scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some.

Patsy sits on a bar-stool at my breakfast counter. She is sipping a glass of soy milk through a straw. I glance at her, then look away at my rainforestcam on the wallscreen behind her. My granddaughter had an incisor removed so that she could drink through the straw with her mouth closed. She claims it is more sanitary and less offensive to other people. I don't know about "other people." It offends the hell out of her grandmother.

"So. SATs next week?" I ask her hopefully.

"Uh-huh," she confirms and I breathe a small sigh of relief. She had contemplated refusing to take them, on the grounds that any college who wanted to rate her on a single test score was not her kind of place anyway. She swings her feet, kicking the rungs of her stool. "I'm still debating Northwestern versus Peterson University."

I try to recall something about Peterson, but I don't think I've ever heard of it. "Northwestern's good," I hedge. As I set a plate of cookies within her reach, I notice a bulge in the skin on her shoulder blade just above the fabric of her tank top. An irritated peace sign seems to be emblazoned on it. "What's that? New tattoo?"

She glances over her shoulder at it, then shrugs. "No. Raised implant. They put a stainless steel piece under your skin. Works best when there's bone backing it up. Mine didn't come out very good. Grandma, you know I can't eat those things. If the fat doesn't clog up my heart, the sugar will send me into a depression and I'll kill myself."

She nudges the plate of cookies away. I smile and take one myself. "I think that's a bit of an exaggeration. I've been eating chocolate chip cookies for years."

"Yeah, I know. And Mom, too. Look at her."

"Doesn't it hurt?" I ask, nodding at her implant. I evade the topic of her mom. It is not that I expect my granddaughter to always get along with my daughter. It is that I don't want to be wedged into the middle of it. I tell myself that this is not cowardice. By standing apart from their mother-daughter friction, I keep the lines of communication open between Patsy and myself.

My gambit is successful. "This?" She tosses her head at her implanted peace sign. "No. A little slit in the skin, then they free the skin layer from the tissue underneath it, slide in the emblem, put in a couple of stitches. It healed in two days, and now it's permanent. Besides. Women have always been willing to suffer for beauty. Inject collagen into your lips. Get breast implants. Have your ribs removed to have a smaller waist."

I give a mock shudder. "I never went in for those sorts of things. I think God meant us to live in our bodies the way they are."

"Yeah, right." She snorts skeptically, and picks up a cookie crumb, then licks it off her finger. I catch a brief glimpse of her tongue stud. "You made Mom wear braces on her teeth for two years. She's always telling me what a pain that was. " " " " "

"That was different. That was for health as much as for appearances."

"Oh, let's be honest, Gran." Patsy leans forward on her elbow and fixes me with her best piercing glance. "You didn't take her to an orthodontist because you were worried she couldn't chew a steak. She told me the kids at school were calling her 'Fang.'"

I wince at the memory of my twelve-year-old in tears. It had taken me an hour to get her to tell me why. Katie was never as forthcoming with me as her own daughter is. Perhaps it's a part of the mother-daughter friction heritage. "Well, appearance was part of it. It was affecting her self-esteem. But straight teeth are important to lifelong health and"

"Yeah, but the point is, it was plastic surgery. For the sake of how she looked. And it hurt her. But you still made her do it. For dental hygiene. So she would look like the other kids."

I feel suddenly defensive. Patsy is going over all this as if it is a well-rehearsed argument. "Well, at least it's more constructive than some of the ways you hurt yourself," I challenge her. "Tattoos, body piercing, tooth removal. It's almost like you're punishing yourself for something. It worries me, frankly, that so many people can damage their bodies for the sake of a fad."

"Hardly a fad, Gran. People have been doing it for thousands of years. It's not some weird self-punishment. It's not just that it looks good, it makes a point about yourself. That you have the will to make yourself who you want to be. Even if it means a little pain." She pokes speculatively at the heaped cookies.

"Or a lot of infection."

"Not with that new antibiotic. It kills everything."

"That's what worries me," I mutter.

I take another cookie. Nothing betrays my amusement as Patsy absent-mindedly takes one and dunks it in her milk. She slurps off a bite, then says with a full mouth, "I'm getting cut myself."

"Cut?" The bottom drops out of my stomach. I'd seen it on the netnews. "Like a joint off one of your little fingers like those BaseChristian kids did? To seal their promise to never do drugs?" An almost worse thought finds me. "Not that facial scarification they do with the razor blades and ash?"

She laughs aloud and my anxiety eases. "No, Granma!" She hops off her stool and grabs her groin. "Cut! Here, you know."

"No, I don't know." How can I suddenly be so afraid of what I don't know?

"Circumcision. Everyone's talking about it. Here." While I am still gaping at her, she takes her net link from her collar and points it at my wallscreen. My rainforestcam scene gives way to one of her favorite links. I cringe at what I see. Some net star in a glam pose has her legs spread. Larger than life, she fills my wall. Head thrown back, hair cascading over her shoulders, she is sharing with us her freshly healed female circumcision. Symmetrical and surgically precise are the cleanly healed cuts. It is a pharaonic circumcision, and the shaved seamed pudenda remind me obscenely of the stitched seam down an old-fashioned football. I blink and force myself to look again, but all I can see is the absence of the flesh that should be there. I turn away, sickened, but Patsy stares, fascinated. "Doesn't it look cool? In

the interview, she says she did it to get a role. She wanted to show the producer her absolute commitment to the project. But now she loves it. She says she feels cleaner, that she has cut a lot of animal urges out of her life. When she has sex now . . . here, I can just play the interview for you"

"No, thanks," I say faintly. I tap my master control and the screen goes completely blank. After what I have just seen, I could not bear the beauty of the rainforestcam with the wet, dripping leaves and the calling birds everywhere. I take a breath. "Patsy, you can't be serious."

She clips her link back onto her collar and pops back onto her stool. "You know I am, Granma. I came over here to tell you about it. At least you aren't having a meltdown like Mom did."

"She knows you want to do this?" I can't grasp any of it, not that some women do this voluntarily, not that Patsy wants to do it, not that Katie knows.

Patsy crunches down the rest of her cookie. "She knows I'm going to do it. Me and Ticia and Samantha. Mary Porter, too. We'll be like a circumcision group, like some African tribes had. We've grown up together. The ceremony will be a bond between us the rest of our lives."

"Ceremony." I don't know when I stood up. I sit back down. I press my knees together because they are shaking. Not to protect my own genitals.

"Of course. At the full moon tonight. The midwife who does it has this wonderful setting, it's an open field with these big old rocks sticking up out of it, and the river flowing by where you can hear it."

"A midwife does this?"

"Well, she used to be a midwife. Now she says she only does circumcisions, that this is more symbolic and fulfilling to her than delivering babies. But she is medically trained. Everything will be sterilized, and she uses antibiotics and all that stuff. So it's safe."

I suppose I should be relieved they are not using broken glass or old razor blades. "I don't get it," I say at last. I peer at my granddaughter. "Is this some sort of religious thing?"

She bursts out laughing. "No!" she sputters at last. "Granma! You know I don't go for that cult stuff. This is just about me taking control of my own life. Saying that sex doesn't run me, that I won't choose a man just because I'm horny for him, that I'm more than that."

"You're giving up sexual fulfillment for the rest of your life." I state it flatly, wanting her to hear how permanent it is.

"Granma, orgasm isn't sexual fulfillment. Orgasm isn't that much better than taking a good shit."

I smile in spite of myself. "Then you're sleeping with the wrong boys. Your grandfather"

She covers her ears in mock horror. "Don't gross me out with old-people sex stories. Ew!" She drops her hands. "Sexual fulfillment—that's like code words that say women are about sex. Women need sexual fulfillment, like it's more important than being a fulfilled person."

We are arguing semantics when what I want to tell her is not to let some

fanatic cut her sweet young flesh away from her body. Don't let anyone steal that much of you, I want to say. I don't. I suddenly understand how grave this is. If I become too serious, she won't hear me at all. She is poking me, trying to provoke me to act like a parent. I hold myself back from that futile abyss. I sense that Katie has already plunged to the bottom of it. Reasoning with her won't work. Get her to talk, and maybe she will talk herself out of it.

"Have you any idea how much it's going to hurt? Well, I'm sure she'll use an anesthetic for the surgery, but afterward when you're healing"

"Duh! That would defeat the whole purpose. No anesthetic. It would go against the traditions of female circumcision throughout the world. Ticia and Mary and Sam and I will be there for each other. It will be just women sharing their courage with other women."

"Female circumcision was invented by men!" I retort. "To keep women at home and subservient to them. To take away a precious part of their lives. Patsy, think about this. You're young. Once done, you can't go back."

"Sure you can. At the midwife's site, there's a link to a place that can make you look like you did before. Here." She is fiddling with her netlink. I press the OFF on my master control again.

"That's appearance, not functionality. They can't restore functionality. How would they make you a new clitoris?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. And you should know that much before you get into this. I can't understand how that woman can do this to girls." The parent part is getting the better of me. I clamp my lips down.

Patsy shakes her head at me. "Granma! It has always been women doing it to other women, in all the cultures. Look." She reaches over to push my master button back ON. "Here's a link to the midwife's website. Go look at it. She has all the historical stuff posted there. You like anthropology. You should be fascinated."

I stare at her, defeated. She is so sure. She argues well, and she is not stupid. She is not even ignorant. She is merely young and in the throes of her time. Patsy will do this if she is not stopped. I don't know how to stop her. Her words come back to me. Women doing it to other women. Women perpetuating this maiming. I try to imagine what this midwife must be like. I try to imagine how she began doing this to other women, how she could find it fulfilling. I can't. "I'd have to meet her," I say to myself.

Patsy brightens. "I hoped you would. Look. On her site, my link is the Moon Sisters. Our password is Luna. Because we chose the full moon. There's pictures of us, and the date and time and place. You're invited. Mary wanted to have a webcam on the ceremony, but we voted her down. This is private. For us. But I'd like you to be there."

"Will your mom be there?"

Again her snort of disbelief. "Mom? Of course not. She gets all worked up whenever I talk about it. She threatened to kill our midwife. Can you believe that? I asked her if she ever bombed abortion clinics when she was younger. She said it wasn't the same thing at all. Sure it is, I told her. It's all about choice, isn't it? Women making their own sexual choices." Her beeper

chimes and she leaps from the stool. "Wow, I've got to get going. Teddy's going to drive me out there. He won't stay, of course. This is only for women."

I make my last stand. "How does Teddy feel about this?"

She shakes her head at me. "You just don't get it, Granma. It's not about Teddy. It's my choice. But he's excited. After this, if I have sex with him, he'll know it's not because I'm horny at the moment, but because I want to give that to him. And I think he's excited because it will be different. Tighter because of how she sews us up. You know men."

She doesn't wait for an answer from me, which is good, because right now I am sure that I don't even know women, let alone men. As soon as she is out the door, I phone Katie. In a moment, I see her in the inset of my wall screen, but she does not meet my eyes. She is looking past me, at something on her own wallscreen. Her hand is uplifted, guiding a tinkerbell pointer device. Her blue-green eyes are rapt with fascination. I stare for a moment at my beautiful talented daughter. By a supreme effort of will, I don't shriek, "Circumcision! Patsy! Help!" Instead I say, "Hi, whatchadoing?"

"Sorting beads from the St. Katherine site. It's fascinating. You know my beadmaker from the Charlotte site? Well, I'm finding her work here, too. They're unmistakably hers from the analysis. Which means these people traveled over a far greater area than we first supposed." She moves the tinkerbell in the air, teasing a bead on her screen into a different window.

"Or that the trade network was greater," I suggest as I smile at her. Despite my current panic, I have to smile at the sight of her. She is so intent, her eyes roving over her own screen as she continues working. When she is enraptured in her archaeology like this, she suddenly looks eighteen again. There is that huntress-fierceness to her stare. I am so proud of her and all that she is. She nods her agreement. I know she is busy, but this is important. Still, I procrastinate. I love to see her like this. Soon enough I will have to shatter her ardent focus. "Do you ever miss actually handling the beads and the artifacts?"

"Oh. Well, yes, I do. But this is still good. And the native peoples have been much more receptive to our work now that they know all the grave goods will remain in situ and relatively undisturbed. The cameras and the chem scanners can do most of the data gathering for us. But it still takes a human mind to put it all together and figure out what it means. And this way of doing it is better, both for archaeology and anthropology. Sometimes we're too trapped in our own time to see what it all means. Sometimes we're too close, temporally, to understand the culture we're investigating. By leaving all the artifacts and bones in situ, we make it possible for later anthropologists to take a fresh look at it, with unprejudiced eyes." She glances up at me and our eyes meet. "So. You called?"

"Patsy," I say.

She clenches her jaw, takes a breath and sighs it out. The intent eighteen-year old anthro student is gone, replaced by a worried, tired mom. The lines in her face deepen and her eyes go dead. "The circumcision."

"Yes. Katie, you have to stop her!"

"I can't." She looks away from me, staring fiercely at her beads as if she will find some answer there.

"You can't?" I am outraged.

She is weary. Her voice trembles. "Legally, her body is her own. Once a child is over fourteen, a parent cannot interfere in"

"I don't give a damn about legal" I try to break in, but she continues doggedly.

"Any decision the child makes about her sexuality. Birth control, abortions, adopting-out of children, gender reassignment, confidential medical treatment for venereal disease, plastic surgery—it's all covered in that Freedom of Choice act." She gives me a woeful smile that threatens to become a grimace. "I supported that legislation. I never thought it would be construed like this."

"Are you sure it covers things like this?" I ask faintly.

"Too sure. Patsy has forced me to be sure. Shall I forward all the web links to you? She has, in her typical thorough way, researched this completely . . . at least in every way that supports her viewpoint." She shrugs helplessly. "I gave her a set of links to websites that oppose it. I don't know if she looked at them at all. I can't force her."

I realize I have my hand clenched over my mouth. I pull it away. "You seem so calm," I observe in disbelief.

For an instant, her eyes swim with tears. "I'm not. I'm just all screamed out. I'm exhausted, and she has stopped listening to me. What can I do?"

"Stop her. Any way you can."

"Like you stopped Mike from dropping out of school?"

Even after all the years, I feel a pang of pain. I shake my head. "I did everything I could. I'd drop your brother off at the front door, I'd watch him go into the school, and he'd go right out the back door. Battling him was not doing anything for our relationship. I had to let him make that mistake. I stopped yelling at him in an effort to keep the relationship intact. At least, it saved that much. He dropped out of school, but he didn't move out or stop being my son. We could still talk."

"Exactly," Katie says. She stares past me at her screen but I have broken the spell. She can no longer forget her daughter's decision in wonder at some ancient beadmaker's work. "I was quite calm last night. I told her that all I asked was that she always remember the decision was hers and that I completely opposed it. 'Fine,' she said. 'Fine.' At least this way, she'll come back here after the damned ceremony instead of overnighting in a circumcision hut with just the other girls. If she gets an infection or doesn't stop bleeding, at least I'll know about it and can rush her to the hospital."

"Can you legally still do that?" I ask with bitterness that mocks, not her, but the society we live in.

"I think so." She stops speaking and swallows. "Pray, Mom," she begs me after a moment. "Pray that when the other girls scream, she loses her courage and runs away. That's my last hope."

"It's a slim one, then. Our Patsy never lacked for guts. Brains, maybe, but not guts." We smile at one another, pride battling with despair. "Once she's said she'll do a thing, she won't back down no matter how scared she is."

She'll let that woman cut her up and sew her tight rather than be seen as a coward by her friends."

"It's the baby I feel sorry for," Katie says suddenly.

"Baby?" All the hair on my body stands up in sudden horror.

"Mary's baby. She decided to have her baby done, the midwife is doing the baby first."

I didn't even know Mary had a baby. She is only a year older than Patsy. "But she can't! She has no right to make a decision like that, to scar her daughter for the rest of her life!"

Again the bitter smile makes Katie a sour old woman I don't know. "It's the flip side of the Freedom of Choice act. The compromise Congress made to get it passed. Under the age of fourteen, a parent can make any choice for the child. Mary is Bartolema's mother. It's her decision."

"It's barbaric! It's abusive!"

"You had Mike circumcised when he was two days old."

That jolts me. I try to justify it. "It was a different time. Almost all boys were circumcised then. Your dad and I didn't even think about it, it was just what you did. If the baby was a boy, you had him circumcised. They told us it made it easier to keep the baby clean, that it helped prevent cancer of the penis, that it would make him like all the other boys in the locker room."

"They did it without anesthetic."

I am silent. I am no longer sure if we are talking about Mary's baby girl, or my own tiny son, all those years ago. I remember tending to the fresh cut on his penis, dabbing on petroleum jelly to keep his diaper from sticking to it. I am suddenly ashamed of myself. I had not hesitated, had not questioned it, all those years ago. I had charged ahead and done what others told me was wise, done what everyone else was doing.

Just like Patsy.

The silence has stretched long, and said more than words. "She invited me to be there," I say quietly. "Do you think I should go? Is that like giving my approval?"

"Go," Katie pleads quickly. "If it all goes wrong, you can rush her to a hospital. She won't tell me where it is, and I won't ask you to betray that confidence. But be there for her, Mom. Please."

"Okay," I say quietly. I've said it. I'll go watch her daughter and my grand-daughter be maimed.

Katie has started to cry.

"I love you, baby. You're a good mom," I tell her. She shakes her head wildly, tears and hair flying, and breaks the connection.

For a time I stare at my rainforest. Then I get up. There is a backpack in the hall closet. I take it to the bathroom and begin to put things in it. Clean towels. Bandaging. I shudder as I put in the alcohol. I try to think what else. There is a spray antiseptic with a "non-sting, pain relieving

ingredient." Feeble. What else should I take, what else? I stare into the medicine cabinet but find no help there.

I draw a breath and look in the mirror. Katie's face is an echo of mine, made perfect. Patsy, I see you in my green eyes and almost cleft chin. They are mine, the woman and the girl, the daughter of my body and my daughter's daughter. Born so soft and pink and perfect. I make my arms a cradle and wish they were both still mine to hold and protect. Protect. It is what a mother does, and no matter how old one gets, one never stops being a mother.

I grope behind the stacked towels on the shelf and take it down. Shining silver, it slips from the holster, releasing the smell of Hoppes Oil. There is a horsie on the handle. Fred always loved Colts. There is a dusty box of ammunition, too. I break it open, and begin to fill the empty cylinders, one by one. The bullets slide in like promises to keep.

I am suddenly calm. Don't be afraid, baby. Not my baby, not Mary's baby, no one's baby need fear. Granma is coming. No one's going to cut you.

I think for a moment of what a mess I'm going to make of my life. I think of the echoes that will spread out from one bullet, and I wonder how Patsy and her friends will deal with it, and what it will do to Katie. This is my freedom of choice, I tell myself fiercely. My turn to choose. Then I know I am too close to any of it to understand. Maybe we should just leave the midwife's body where it falls. In situ. Perhaps in a hundred years or two, someone else will know what to make of it all.