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Scarifying

by Penny Jones

She knew the old woman whose house she had been taken to as a sharp-eyed market seller who seldom smiled but when she did it was as a result of a good sale or a job well done. Now that they had arrived she became aware that some serious business was about to begin. Her mother and aunts had laid her down and held her arms. The old woman smiled an unexpectedly gentle smile.

“Are you comfortable?” the old woman asked, “then we can start.”

“You’re a little scary sometimes, you know that?”

“Of course. It is intentional. How else would I keep my position of authority? I have important and necessary work to do.”

The scarifier raised the knife blade, sharpened to an edge of such fineness that it was impossible to focus on it. Only the thinnest welling of the blood that rose at each incision was visible, marking first the forehead in delicate scarlet rows and then diagonals on her cheeks, where it slid down, pooling at the base of her jaws below her ears. There was a small time-lag between the incision and the pain. The hiatus was followed by the soft flow of the blood. The tears came and washed away the blood but as it worsened the pain, she screwed her eyes tight shut and tried not to feel each cut.

The scarifier said, “soften your face. The clenching of the muscles will distort the lines and mar the fine scars which will make you beautiful and desired.”

She knew that each cut had to be as shallow as possible so that the scars would be only slightly raised and very narrow, making a delicate tracery that would follow the contours of her bones. Her life and perfectly smooth skin would be forever enhanced by these moments of suffering and resolve.