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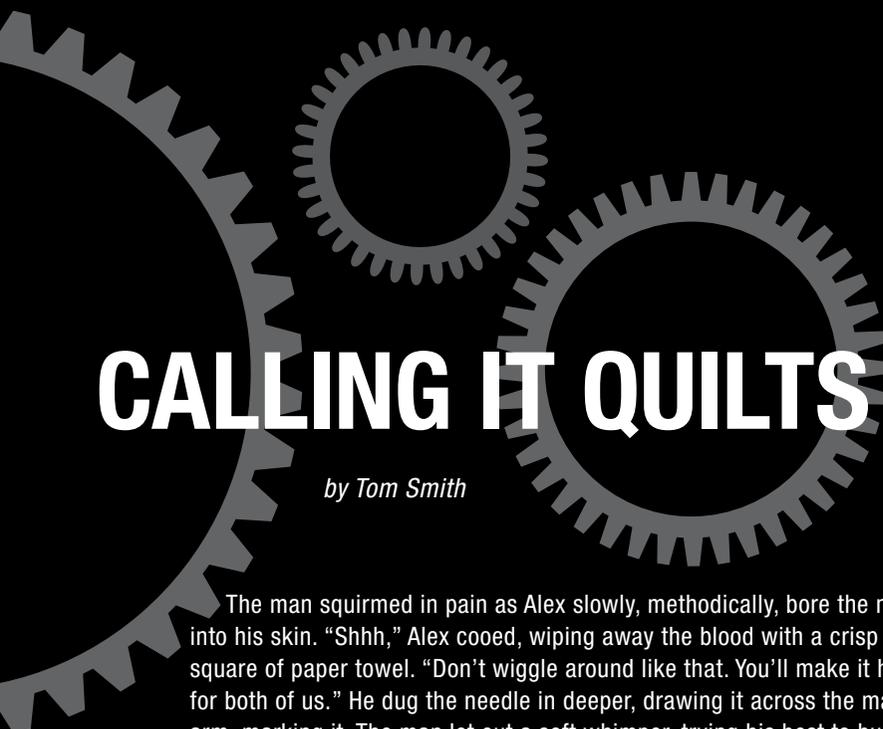


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CALLING IT QUILTS

by Tom Smith

The man squirmed in pain as Alex slowly, methodically, bore the needle into his skin. “Shhh,” Alex cooed, wiping away the blood with a crisp white square of paper towel. “Don’t wiggle around like that. You’ll make it harder for both of us.” He dug the needle in deeper, drawing it across the man’s arm, marking it. The man let out a soft whimper, trying his best to bury the pain, to not show his weakness. “Good. Stay still. Or you’ll ruin my canvas.” The needle dug into the man’s arm, sending shock-waves of pain up through him. “A tattoo is supposed to be painful. They’re born from pain.” Alex wiped away more of the man’s blood. “And anyway, you’re the one who insisted on getting this yin-yang permanently scarred on your body, so quit whining. And for crap’s sake, stop squirming.”

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Alex let the hot water cascade over his head as he scrubbed away the day’s sweat, ink, and the almost-too-sanitary smell of the tattoo parlor, the smell that no amount of scrubbing seemed to scour away. As he stepped out of the shower to dry off, he examined himself in the mirror. Despite being nude, he appeared fully clothed; there was more ink visible than his own flesh. His hair had been buzzed off—his own handiwork—but had begun to poke through his skull just enough to justify a trim. He had more piercings than he did friends. Looking himself in the eyes he forced a smile, and dressed himself. His favorite Black Sabbath t-shirt was beginning to

feel a bit snug. He knew he could stand to lose a pound or fifty, but being thin just didn't seem very metal.

He emerged from the bathroom back into his tiny, one bedroom apartment. Nobody was there to greet him other than his small, black cat, blinking at him from across the dark room. His living room was hot, dark, and stuffy. Alex turned on an old brass lamp next to his couch, and suddenly the room exploded into a flurry of colors, patterns, and textures. Every square inch of every wall of his apartment, from floor to ceiling, was covered with quilts, each more intricate than the last. He had hand-sewn each, and they represented years of painstaking work. Quilting was the one thing his grandmother had taught him before she'd left him forever. In fact, it was the only thing anyone in the family had ever taught him. His parents, his aunt, his uncles—they all viewed him as an oddball, the weirdo, the black sheep. Their affections were instead poured on Alex's sister, the honor student, the cheerleader, the college grad. When sewing he could feel his grandmother's presence in every square, like he'd never lost her, and it filled him with the sense of self-worth that only she had ever given him. He gazed around the room, admiring his craft. "I guess I only feel comfortable with a needle in my hand, huh?" The black cat only blinked in reply.

He dropped his full weight onto the center of his old, green couch, its holes long since patched with shiny streaks of silver duct-tape. It sent a plume of dust into the air, the particles dancing in the small amount of sunlight creeping in through the quilt-covered windows. With two broad sweeps of his massive arms he cleared the debris off of the coffee table in front of him. On the left side he piled junk foods, and on the right, his sewing kit. In the center, he set his latest project, neatly folded. "I finish my masterpiece tonight," he said, carefully unfurling his newest work. The cat jumped up next to him, curled itself into a tight ball and fell asleep, prompting Alex, subconsciously, to give the creature's ears a gentle scratch. "It's for her, you know." He let out a long, soft sigh, holding his needle to the scant light and carefully feeding the thread through its eye.



The girl working counter at the Scarred for Life tattoo parlor was the only thing that could distract Alex from his typically immaculate sketches. Her short, dark hair was accented with bright streaks of hot pink. It framed her round face, which housed a collection of metal that could possibly rival Alex's own piercings. Her name was Ruby, and his powerful crush on her usually reduced him to a blathering idiot in her presence.

They'd known each other all their lives, or at least that's how it seemed to Alex. In the sixth grade, he had asked her out via a homemade Valentine that read, "I can't heartly wait to take you on a date." On the back of it she had quickly scribbled, "You're too late, I'm dating Nate," and handed it back



to him. Sophomore year, in an incredibly misguided attempt to woo her, he had learned to play guitar. He stood outside her window each night for a week straight, playing songs he'd written for her. He was mortified to later discover that she slept with earplugs in, and hadn't heard a single chord. On the rare occasions he'd had the courage to simply and directly ask her to go on a date, her response was usually one she'd seemingly selected from a short list: "You're sweet, but you're just not my type," "I'm seeing someone else," "I'm really busy with school right now," and occasionally, a simple, swift, painful "no."



The man screamed, and struggled to compose himself. "Think about it," Alex began, ignoring the man's discomfort. "A tattoo is a manifestation of pain. They're born through emotional pain; something or someone you love so much, you can't let them ever be further away from you than your own skin." The man winced, nodding slowly, but not speaking. "They're guided by creative pain. That's my pain. The pain of being unable to live up to your vision, or the pain of having your vision limited by others." Alex didn't think the man was listening to him. Not really listening, anyway. He wiped away more blood, the clean white paper towel becoming a dark crimson. "And they're made—as you're experiencing now—through physical pain." The man kept his eyes tightly closed, responding to Alex with only a slow nod.



The needle dove through the surface, plunging deep, breaching only moments later and soaring high into the air. Alex drove it through the fabric of his masterpiece with quick, precise movements. He was driven—by what seemed to him to be nothing other than divine inspiration—to work at an impossible, feverish pace. Each patch was a part of him, an extension of his physical body. It was as if he was sewing his own skin into each square. Sweat glistened on his large, meaty head as he sewed in the final patch, directly in the center of the quilt. It showed an image of a large, red gem, its radiance stretching out towards every other square.

Ruby didn't know the real him. She knew the fat guy. The metal head. The guy covered in ink. The guy who hadn't stopped asking her out since they had started middle school. Today was different. Today she would see the real him. Slowly, with his masterwork tucked beneath his sweating armpit, he approached the desk.

"Hey Ruby."

"Oh, hey Alex." She was chipper, polite. Alex was sure she felt uncomfortable around him, though she didn't divulge this by her tone. Though far from the keenest of observers, he had noticed that, after she



had rejected his previous nine attempts at asking her out, she had begun switching shifts with whomever she could to avoid sharing work hours with him. But he was undeterred because he'd finally finished the ultimate symbol of his affection, and he knew that when she received it, she would see who he truly was.

"This is for you, Ruby. I made it." He awkwardly thrust his arm out towards her, the quilt clutched in his massive fist.

"You sew? Seriously?" He handed her the carefully folded spread, and she took it gingerly, unfolding it slowly, suspiciously, as if she were expecting something to jump out of it and bite her. Alex watched as she took it in. He watched her eyes as they moved from patch to patch, each of which represented a different design from his tattoo portfolio. Her expression was hard to gauge, but Alex knew when she'd reached the all-important three patches in the center: an illustration of himself on the left, of her on the right, and the brilliant ruby, shining between them from dead center. Her eyes went wide, and her hand shot to her mouth. "Oh, Alex." Tears began to well in her eyes, and her voice trembled. "I'm sorry, I can't. This is just too much. It's really too much." She thrust the quilt into Alex's chest, exiting the room quietly, as quickly as she could.

Alex could barely move, barely breath. As he came to his senses, he took two large, red pushpins from the counter. Slowly, silently, he walked across the parlor and back to his chair, looking up at his wall of designs. He put pins into the top corners of the quilt, and then stuck it to the wall, covering his existing portfolio. He fell into the chair, gazing peacefully, unmoved, at his life's work, sewn neatly into a perfect square. For an eternity the only sound was the parlor's buzzing florescent lights. The silence was abruptly punctuated by a ringing bell, and Alex looked instinctively towards the door. A young woman had entered. Ruby had not yet returned to her post at the desk, so Alex rose to help the woman.

"Does it hurt?" she asked him.

"It does," he told her honestly. "But anything that's going to leave an impression on you is going to have to hurt somehow." The girl nodded, and began to admire his quilt.

"You can do all these?" she asked, motioning to the images on the quilt. He could, he assured her. They were all his original designs. She picked the one she liked the most—a koi swimming in a pond—and sat down. Alex picked up his needle, approached his canvas, and found that he was comfortable.

