

# Touched

Category: Stories

written by Karen Myers | June 19, 2009

## **Karen Myers**

"I can feel the life force leaving me," Mike says as he massages my legs with his rough, careful hands. He doesn't use oil or lotion like the other massage therapists. Just his sticky, Marlboro-scented fingers. I lie in my underwear beneath a green sheet. My bony shoulder blades and crooked spine press into the table, having long since lost their cushion of muscle.

"We're getting older," Mike says, even though we've barely reached forty. "Maybe that's why we're so afraid. We don't have the energy to fight like we used to."

Mike's eyes bulge like a bullfrog's. When I first knew him, I found them a bit frightening. His voice is raspy and deep. He has a fading tattoo on his left biceps and a ponytail that curls down his back. I met him at the massage school, where he was training to be a therapist and I was getting treatment for muscular dystrophy. I always thought he was quirky, and he talks too much, but his massages are cheap.

Since my diagnosis at age fourteen, when we first noticed a slight limp and a protruding shoulder blade, I'd spent most of my years ignoring my body. I pushed myself to work and play as hard as everyone else. I wanted to deny the disease that would cause a slow wasting away of the muscles throughout my body. By the time I hit thirty, my right arm was thin as a matchstick and could barely hold a dinner plate. A trip to the supermarket used up my stamina for the day. Stairs were harder to climb. My body was shrinking away. I moved to San Francisco, the mecca of alternative therapies, in the hopes that my dying muscles might come to life again. In the end, I found massage and bodywork the most beneficial.

"I can scare away animals with my eyes," Mike says as he moves my toes in circle formations. My ankles don't flex as easily as they used to. I swallow hard and try to relax. "There are these bees around my house, and if I take all my angry energy and focus it at them, they fly away. It works with people, too."

His anger, he tells me, is the only thing that keeps him going. He should be paralyzed by the disintegrating discs in his spine that cause him constant pain.

"I don't believe in God," Mike says as I turn onto my stomach. "There's no way there's a God. There's so much suffering by so many people." As I stretch out my legs, my fingertips brush against a hollow crevice formerly occupied by muscle in the backs of my thighs.

The night before, I'd been seriously praying. The kind of prayer where I

actually speak out loud. The “Oh God, I can’t handle this anymore, I don’t know what to do, please help me!” kind of prayer. The muscles in my body were so sore, I thought my disease would finally knock me down. I’d been going to the pool and eating leafy green vegetables as my holistic doctor had recommended, but still fatigue enveloped me. Fear gripped me so tightly that I could barely breathe. Should I exercise more, exercise less, speed up, slow down, get more bodywork, get less bodywork, stop the vitamins or take more?

At 10:00 the next morning, Mike called me.

“Hey, Karen,” he said. I hadn’t spoken with him since our last massage, eight months earlier, but he didn’t find it necessary to identify himself. “I’m in town doing massages, and somebody just canceled. I got a gut feeling I should call you. If you come over right now, I’ll give you a session.”

I know Mike is a little out there, but he’s been a thread in my life—one of those people who emerges every once in a while, like a flare in a pitch-black night. He can meet me at my deepest points of despair and help me find the wisdom there.

“Feel that?” Mike says as he presses on the knot in the middle of my back. “That is the place that holds your breath. If you open that up, you’ll release a lot of emotion.”

Mike understands pieces of me in the same way that I understand pieces of him. His breath is caught in the same place of tightness; he talks about his own anxiety and depression as if it were mine.

“Take it easy on the exercise,” he says. “Eat lots of ice cream, and have some fun. You’re going to be fine.” I laugh and feel a heaviness lift from my body.

I trust his words. Today, his wild eyes don’t overwhelm me.

I get off the table, get dressed and meet Mike in the hallway. I open my wallet.

“No,” Mike says, shaking his head. “Let’s keep this clean.”

I want to burst into tears. Mike is poorer than I am, and he won’t take my money.

He reaches out and hugs me.

“It’s really hard to be understood by ‘normal’ people,” he whispers into my ear. “I know you understand me.”

I wrap my arms around him and touch his broken spine.

#### **About the author:**

Karen Myers is a freelance writer who has published many essays about her experiences living with facioscapulohumeral (FSH) muscular dystrophy. She is

co-editor of the anthology *My Body of Knowledge: Stories of Chronic Illness, Disability, Healing, and Life*. Please visit her website at [www.CrackedBellPublishing.com](http://www.CrackedBellPublishing.com).

**Story editor:**

Diane Guernsey