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Written on the Skin

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Mr. Markowitz, the owner of the neighborhood market always rolled up his sleeves, forcing us to read the blue numbers on his left forearm.

When my mother sent me the three blocks to the store for something she’d forgotten, his smile a wolf, when I’d stare.

“He uses those numbers,” my mother fumed, “so you’ll be too embarrassed to argue that he overcharges by a nickel or dime.”

This was back when markets delivered: his regular man, flu-bound one afternoon; so after he’d rung up the Kotex my mother blushed for, Mr. Markowitz bicycled a big order down Avenue H, and as he passed me, pointed toward the corner, to Tommy Lockhart—our neighborhood kapo—first big, hard, and merciless.

“Help!” I wanted to shout, but knew Mr. Markowitz wouldn’t: how he’d managed to survive.