

Ethan Forrest Ross

Scabs

Now that the old man's newest scab has aged a few days and its crust has turned the color of roasted corn, he looks down at the back of his hand and sees that actually there are two cuts. An almost-straight line against the grain of the knuckle wrinkles. A small dot beneath it, as if from the prick of a pin. He thinks the wound looks like an exclamation point. He doesn't know how it occurred.

The daughter is in the vegetable garden. She kneels and sticks the trowel in and overturns a flowering weed and brings the roots up in her other hand and shakes free the dirt. The carcass goes to the pile with the other green and black bodies. She looks at her old father in the window. His dark plaid shirt blending into the unlit room. His white, attentive face framed and levitating in that upper panel. Returning to her ground, she listens to the smack of the screen door. Light steps on the deck.

"If we do ever find that ring," the old man says, "she would be glad for it."

"I still think there's a fairly good chance that we will find it." The daughter faces away as she speaks.

"Yes." He looks down at her crouched figure, his hands perched on the warped top-board of the rail surrounding the deck. "Somewhere I read once that a woman lost a ring in a garden, much like ours. Found it nine years after, in that same garden. Can you imagine?"

"That really is something."

"Of course, we don't know if her ring is in this garden. We just know she was working in it that first day it turned up missing."

He crosses his arms and looks up into the branches of the maple tree. They overhang this side of the garden where the cucumbers do not grow. The wife, the daughter's mother, has been gone four years. Her ring, seven years. It was on one of her last good days when the ring disappeared.

"I suppose we still have two years, at least," the old man says, "of time left that we might find the ring. Then again, it may take longer than nine years in all, and wouldn't it be the greater the find if we found it still?" He gazes into the hedge on the far boundary of the yard where the neighbor perfects its top every second day of every third week. "Eleven years of it being lost. Fifteen years, even."

“We’ll keep looking, dad. Every day I work out here I keep my eyes peeled.”



The old man goes inside and sits on the couch in the sunroom and attends to his scabs. Over and over, he rubs those rough spots beneath his thumbs. That exclamation without story, that contentless squeal, on the back of his right hand. Two cuts, actually. And another wound, farther up the arm. He remembers that that purple blotch had been caused by a brush against an out-stuck nail where the blood in his veins had rushed out in an open stream. Scabs and marks of scabs, all up his arm. A new scab is like a tattoo for the old man. Nature’s body art and no less permanent.

He doesn’t use the other arm so much. It’s an attachment he drags along. Barren mostly and hairless. It boasts only a single gouge halfway to the elbow. But he remembers that story:

One night, years ago, he helped the grandson—the daughter’s only—remove his new action figures from their plastic casings. They make the plastic incredibly difficult these days, the old man thought. Didn’t used to be that toy manufacturers had to preserve every toy like canned goods. Human fingers wouldn’t do a thing to that plastic, and this was the sort of irritant liable to make him angry. Then he had to get up from the chair anyways and dig around in the kitchen by the phone till he remembered that the abalone jackknife he’d carried forty years was still in his shirt pocket since last Thursday. So the slits in the tops of the plastic casings were sharp with feathered edges, and when he turned it all upside down, the damned twist ties still held the figures in.

“I can do it,” the grandson had said then. He was a big kid for his age and lanky. Rambunctious as some said, and the grandfather liked a kid with spirit. “Let me do it.” The boy took the open blade from the old man’s hand and gripped the handle like an infant’s first attempt with a spoon.

An impossible error followed. How the blade had jerked itself backwards as if overtaken by a thin plane of rushing air, the boy could not understand. Hold a sharp knife, be careful with it, and then its tip is stuck in someone else’s arm? Just attracted there like a magnetic field into the old, bobbing flesh. And he was the stabber of course, because he held it last. The boy was ashamed. Now isn’t that a picture of children doing child things? Reasons for why they say, “Don’t play with matches. Keep up high the knives and guns.”

But the old man looked down at his arm and looked up at the boy. A mistaken blade goes in, and it ought to hurt. He felt the slit of every fiber

like a toneless whispering, a cool breeze, but no shimmer of pain. The old man flexed his arm.

“Grandpa, I’m sorry. I am sorry.”

“It’s alright. It’s startling.”



That day of the knife, they had been sitting in the sunroom on the woolen couch into which the grandson, a few years younger, had once spent an hour impaling wooden skewer sticks. He didn’t mean to shove that first stick all that far in. Just to prick the fabric was a dare itself. A naughty thing. Then he went farther in, and in and out and in, and then that first stick was gone all the way. Such fun, sticking the sticks into the couch until they were lost and their tops could be felt no more even as you pressed your hand far into the fluff. That same November the little boy discovered time. “Next year,” he announced to his mother and grandfather, “this year will be last year.” And the sticks will still be in the couch, he thought. In another year, next year will be last year, and the sticks will still be in the couch.



Sitting in the sun porch makes the old man tired. Or it’s the heat that does him. He stands with difficulty and steps inside to where the air is on. He’s old now. He always assumed he would be, but he never anticipated he would be old like this.

Sometime later, the daughter walks in. Sees him sitting there in his chair. His hands folded in his lap. Bare, bonelike ankles, between the tops of his fringing corduroys and his antique loafers. He wears no socks.

“Any luck?” he says.

“No luck today.”

“Well, it probably won’t be found for some time still. I can’t imagine it would be.”

“Ready for your stew then?”

“Please.”

She goes over to the crock and lifts the lid and stirs through the steam. Up comes the wet medallion flashes of disked carrot and leek.



The grandson hasn’t visited his grandfather’s home since he lived with his mother. That was before he moved out to play ball on a campus two states over. He hasn’t visited his grandfather since the week the ring turned up missing, actually. Still, the daughter thinks often of Jeremy in this house.

Jeremy, age fourteen. Jeremy, evasive and speechless but for “good” and “yeah” and “no.” Jeremy standing before his grandfather, his soft, hollow face staring dead into the old man’s animate vibrance. Your mother’s out there looking for your grandmother’s ring. Says she’ll try as hard as she can to get it back. Wonders if you might of seen it? We both were wondering. She thinks of this Jeremy. Standing there, tall for his age, hands in his jeans.

It’s not that her boy is a thief. Stealing isn’t what it is when it’s stealing from family. Jeremy just couldn’t get the idea of diamonds out of his head, couldn’t disremember the boyish want for gold, real gold. The legacy of pirate chests and sparkling hooks. The salivating softness—like a wadded ball of tinfoil—when a sitcom sheriff bites hard into a genuine lump. Must she regret every October the thirty-first and all the things she let him be?

But somewhere a youngish woman never takes off a ring which, almost obscenely, surpasses whatever expectation there ever was. A youngish man, his name Joseph, gave it to her. No paperwork—was a part of the mysteriousness of it. Him dropping it in a Chinese take-out box instead of the padded case it must have come in. She never even got the case in the end, and they still make jokes about drug sales. A youngish woman never takes off a ridiculous ring and somebody’s grandchild has long smoked-up his first hundred dollars.

This much the daughter knows. To think, a ring worth more than nine months the salary of any member of her family who has ever lived. She is glad, almost, that the ring is not in the garden.



That night, the daughter falls asleep on the sofa. She never used to be the sort who could drift off without willful intension. In these past months, she has taken to sitting in the family room and reading here as well. The old man always sleeps in the chair, his sleep sounds dominating that room like cicadas in an evening tree. His sleep is absolute and self-evident, because the day is done. Hers because books are tools, useful for bringing about fatigue.

She dreams Jeremy is a little boy, sitting somewhere on a concrete stoop and picking at his scraped knees. Picking and picking at them with large pieces of encrusted scab loosening and peeling off like rind from a ripened fruit. “Mommy, look how nasty I am. Look at these things from my skin how nasty they are.”

The daughter wakes and the old man is picking at himself in the chair while he sleeps. His arm limp in his lap. The other arm working its scabs, fingernails pecking like the beak of a crow.

Her son's young face disintegrates in her mind, and the remnant of his dream-self is gone away. The daughter has that thought again: the old man is her child now. Like she ought to take a washrag and reach up in all tender affection and wipe the sleep from the crevices of his eyes. As if to say, "Dad, why you doing that to yourself? Picking at yourself?"

But she will let him be, and she will lay down her head on that decorative pillow with the Indian elephant grinning sideways in its royal drapes. He isn't hurting nothing. He just picks his arms smooth with the shapes beneath the scabs staying as they forever will, for all of time on this earth, all the little that is left to him. Picking till the skin in those parts is as soft as the day of his birth, as tender and bleedable as the innocence of the infant grandson whose body he held on day one, the child's astonished eyes staring into the grandfather's already aged eyes, his own subtle pupils like small, black flares. So there is a grand-baby after all. What can they do but cradle it and not worry about the sort it will be, whether it will love or hurt or make some great progresses of each?

In that chair, the old man will pick his wounds smooth and on his arms there will be only those remaining shapes. Painted as if under ice. Entombed in glass. Stains on the skin like maps emerging to draw back all that seems lost.