

Burned

by Christi Craig

They called him “Albert, the Human Armadillo,” and he was. Rows of hard scales ran down the course of his chest, and he was studied and biopsied by doctor after doctor. “Psoriasis,” they said. “Or, eczema.” They prescribed ointments and oils that left him smelling of fish or burnt embers.

On Albert's twentieth birthday, the first time he'd been home since he took off with the circus, Albert sat at the kitchen table and sipped a root beer. Across from him, his grandmother shook her head. She blamed Albert's scales on the snake his mother found hidden in the woodpile when she was pregnant with Albert. Albert's mother killed the snake, which was likely the cause of his trouble, his grandmother said. “Snakes are bad luck. It's a miracle Albert was born at all.”

“It wasn't the snake,” his mother sighed. “Or, Albert would be covered in scales. It's just his chest, mother. He's fine.” She stood behind Albert and put her hands on his shoulders, kissed his head and told him she was glad he was home.

Albert was eight the first time his skin began to change; it was the year his mother turned forty, “a *monumental* birthday,” his father had told Albert over dinner the night before. Albert's mother had rolled her eyes. But the next morning, her expression turned angry when she saw a sign that said “Over the Hill” taped across the kitchen archway. His father laughed and grabbed his mother around her hips. She wriggled away and stomped off.

“Here I am, forty years old, and still bound to breakfast, lunch and dinner.” She slammed pots and pans around all morning. She hated turning forty; she cried when she said it.

Albert didn't like to see his mother upset, so he worked all day on a card for her. He used the russet crayon to fill in his mother's hair - the perfect shade of brown. She smiled when he gave it to her and

wrapped his face in her hands. Goose bumps tickled the back of his neck and he giggled.

Two days later, though, he found the card abandoned in a pile of newspapers, her drawn face smeared by something wet. The middle of his chest burned, as he pulled his card out of the garbage and walked into the kitchen. The air was heavy with the scent of roast and potatoes, and his mother was shrouded by a cloud of steam rising from the sink as she cleared away the dishes. Albert sat the damaged card on the counter and slid it towards the sink, slid it right into a tiny puddle of dishwater so that a wet circle fanned out across words written in his well-planned cursive. He looked up.

She saw the card first, then she looked at Albert.

"Honey," she said. Her hand grazed his hair, but he ran away before she could pull him close to her. She apologized as she stood outside his closed bedroom door, saying she couldn't keep every card. He refused to listen. He had spent all day with paper and crayons, and he hated art. People were hard to draw, especially his mother. After pushing his desk chair in front of the door, he buried his head under a pillow and cried himself to sleep. When he woke up the next morning, his eyes were swollen, his nose stuffy, and a small, rough patch of skin had formed on the spot that had burned in his chest when he cried.

The patch doubled in size after his father took a trip to Italy the year Albert was in the sixth grade.

"Italy!" His father said, as he threw a packet of brochures in the middle of the table at dinner one night. "Can you believe it?"

"All of us?" His mother shrieked.

"Jesus, Catherine. Of course not." His mother started to say something, but she sunk back down into her chair instead, picking up her knife and cutting into her steak. "It's a business trip, Catherine." His father ran his hand through his hair. "You know I can't take you and Albert." Then, his father grabbed Albert's wrist and shook it. "You're excited for me, boy, right?"

Albert nodded. They had just studied Italy at school. Albert asked about the Leaning Tower of Pisa, would his father see it?

"Damn right I'll see it." His father pushed Albert's plate aside and opened up a brochure. He promised to bring Albert a statue of the Tower when he came home. Albert said he wanted a picture of the Popemobile, too. He'd heard about it from some Catholic kid in class. "The Popemobile!" Albert's father laughed. "Maybe I oughtta bring you a picture of the Pope. Me and the Pope!" He laughed so hard he coughed. Albert's mother excused herself from the table.

But his father didn't bring him a picture or a statue. Instead, when his father returned from Italy, he unpacked an expensive bottle of wine.

"This baby cost me an arm and a leg," he said. "Last one in the whole winery. The boss was eating his heart out."

Albert's eyes filled with tears.

"Go brush your teeth," his mother said, as her hand pressed against his back. Albert locked the bathroom door, just as his father's voice barreled down the hall.

"I'll go back to the airport and buy you a stupid postcard if it means that much to you."

"Liar!" Albert yelled.

The shadow of his mother's feet crossed under the door. "Oh, for God's sake, Richard."

Albert rubbed his breastbone as it began to burn. He sat on the bathroom floor and ripped toilet paper into tiny pieces, pushed the pieces around, and spelled out the word "HATE."

Albert's entire chest succumbed to a full plate of scales after Homecoming night during his junior year of high school, all because of Ruby Westminster. Ruby was Albert's lab partner in Biology and his first girlfriend. She had soft, auburn hair and full lips that she kept lathered in shiny, sweet-smelling lip gloss. She slid his hand under her shirt one day after school and let Albert get to second base, promising to be his date for Homecoming if he'd do the first lab experiment by himself. She couldn't bear to dissect that little

frog, she'd said. Albert did all the dirty work and even gave her his answers for the lab questions to make sure she got an A.

"I knew you'd help me," she said, as she leaned across the lab table the next time in class. She wouldn't let him hold her hand, though. She didn't want the teacher to catch them, she said, didn't want Albert to get into trouble. He thought maybe she'd wait for him in the hall after class, but she ran off with her friend Katie as soon as the bell rang and didn't look back. She did leave his biology notes stuffed in the vent of his locker, though, with the word "Homecoming" written on the paper in bubbled letters and her name signed next to a colored-in heart.

On Homecoming night, he drove his father's station wagon to Ruby's house to pick her up. She knocked him breathless when she walked down the front steps in a violet dress, the same color as the pen she used to doodle the heart on his notes.

"You look beautiful," he said.

"Thanks."

She slipped into the passenger seat; Albert closed the door and ran around to the driver's side. He touched her knee and tried to hold her hand, but she slid her fingers out from under his and dug through her purse for lip gloss. Then, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and looked out her window, as they drove to the A&W Drive-in to hang out before the game.

At the A&W, Ruby ordered a root beer float and said she couldn't go out with him anymore because that spot on his chest was getting bigger she was sure and it was starting to freak her out. She said it all in one breath.

"It isn't contagious," he said, as he gripped the steering wheel.

"It's weird," she hissed at the side of his face. "I can't believe I ever let you touch me."

A wave of heat rose from Albert's stomach to his throat. He started the car and turned on the air. He waited for a minute before he asked, "What about Homecoming?"

"What about it?" She leaned over him and grabbed her float from the tray hanging outside of his window. Then, she climbed out of the

station wagon, ran to the other side of the drive-in, and jumped into Roger Simon's red Mustang. Albert hadn't seen Roger parked there until just then. Roger drove Ruby away with a screech and a squeal.

That next Monday at school, Albert took a swing at Roger. He missed, but Roger didn't. Roger hit Albert square in the chest. Only, it didn't hurt. In fact, the punch barely knocked him back. Roger's knuckles bled, though. That's when they started calling him Albert, the Human Armadillo.

And, that's when Albert stopped treating his condition.

He threw away the oils and ointments and settled into his armor. Sometimes, he stood in front of the mirror and hit his knuckles against his chest, with pride.

After graduation, Albert realized his armored chest could bring him more fame than just a tough reputation at high school. He joined the Freak Show. His mother cried when he told her; his father raised a gin and tonic and told him to watch out for crooks and assholes.

Albert fell into a close knit circle of friends at the circus who, like himself, knew how to capitalize on their anomalies, but the first year in the Show was still difficult. He wouldn't have stayed had it not been for Victor the Elephant Man. Victor was a Freak Show Veteran, well-seasoned, he told Albert, and as old as the hills.

"You'll get used to the stares and pointing, son, and, pretty soon, you'll realize that the real freaks are the ones on the outside."

For Albert's nineteenth birthday, Victor invited him over to his trailer and cooked a late-night dinner of fried pork chops with baked beans. The smell of caramelized meat reminded Albert of home. When they finished eating, Albert offered to do the dishes. Victor brought out photo albums from his years at the circus. They drank beer until two in the morning, and Victor told Albert the secrets of success.

"They call you the Armadillo, so be one. Grow your fingernails," he said. "Paint 'em black, like claws. Swipe at the crowd once in a

while. They'll go crazy." The bigger the crowd, Victor said, the more money he'd earn.

Albert tried long nails for a while, but he felt bad every time he made a young girl scream. So instead, he paced in front of his window like a caged animal. That was enough to draw the crowds. Victor was right, too: the more people who stood at his window, the more Billy the manager paid him. After one year, Albert had saved one thousand dollars.

Then, on a late-August Saturday in Georgia, in the midst of faces that hung like masks in the window of his booth, a young woman with auburn hair raised her eyes and looked directly into his. She wore a soft yellow sundress that hugged her at the waist and then hung loose on down to her knees. He couldn't see her feet, but he imagined something like ballet slippers, imagined that she might take off in a graceful turn; she looked that much like a dream. While the rest of the crowd shrank from his bare, scaly chest, she stayed, putting one hand on his window and waving with the other. He stopped pacing and waved back. He thought to say something to her, ask her name maybe. Then, he remembered.

Through the window, she scanned the space around him, and the temperature in his room rose. He stepped backwards to his chair and sat down, slid his bare feet underneath and dragged with them a layer of dirt and grime. It was then that he noticed the worn upholstery on the arm, the chipped and leaning table next to him, the peeling paint on the walls. The something-warm in his chest that felt different from before.

