Open Wounds

by Adam Byatt

“Let's see what we've got,” said the triage nurse in Emergency.

Jack presented his left forearm and unwrapped the bloody tea towel.

“That's a nasty cut. Come on through.” The nurse pressed the door button and Jack heard a buzz and a click to his left. Leaning over his wife kissed his cheek.

“I'll take the boys to the cafeteria. Keep them out from underfoot.”

Making his way through the heavy doors, Jack followed the nurse to a small room and sat in the seat he was directed to.

“The doctor will be with you shortly.”

Jack stared at his arm resting on the arm of the chair, the towel loosely reapplied. He thought back to his eldest son's bicycle accident two years ago and the chunked up mess of his knee. It required eight stitches and the extraction of five pieces of gravel.

His son was chuffed knowing there would be a cool scar, once the tears had subsided and jellybeans were offered.

Where the skin had grazed, shredded by the coarse gravel to form scabs, fascinated Jack. It reminded him of his youth and his own grazes, scratches and stitches. As a boy he imagined scabs were rough foundations of igneous rock, blood like lava pouring through the wound, cooling and hardening in the dry atmosphere outside the skin.

He would wait a few days to pick at the edges, exposing the new pink, puckered flesh beneath. Pick too early and it simply bled again. Sometimes he did it to prolong the healing process and give him more scabs to pick at.

Playing “volcanoes” he squeezed the scabs and watched the blood rise through new cracks. It was a bonus when pus splurted out. Dabbing with a tissue he squeezed again until the wound rinsed itself with blood.

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If caught picking, his mother insisted on applying a Band Aid to stop him. Later in the bath, Jack soaked the Band Aid off, his downy hair providing little resistance. Later in life, he grimaced as he pulled at the edges, lifting the hairs with the intensity of tiny pinpricks, before ripping it off hastily.

“If you keep picking at it,' his mother scolded, “It won't get better.”

He always picked and it always healed.

“What do we have here?” said the doctor, the snap of rubber gloves sharp in Jack's ears.

“I was cutting some of the low branches down the backyard with the bush saw. I had my hands above my head, cutting through the branch. Thought I had the weight but it was heavier than I thought. Don't know if it was the edge of the branch or the blade or both that hit me.”

“Let's take a look.”

Peeling away the tea towel the doctor examined the gash on Jack's arm, prodding gently with his fingers. “Let's get that cleaned up. About five or six stitches as it's pretty deep and jagged.”

As the doctor prepped to suture his arm, Jack watched mentally from a distance and remembered the nicks, scrapes, grazes and cuts of childhood and adolescence. All healed with time, as the skin rejuvenated leaving no trace of the injury.

His father's sharp words of disappointment and criticism directed towards seven-year-old Jack, echoed in his mind, “Look what you've done to yourself. And ruined your good trousers.” Thirty years since the event and five years after his passing the words retained their sharpness.

The playground mantra “stick and stones will break my bones…” formed on his lips but he wavered and did not complete the line, knowing the ironic absurdity of its meaning. Unseen wounds that never healed despite not picking at them.

Jack winced as the needle was pushed into his flesh beneath the surface. He felt the push of the anaesthetic and tensed in anticipation of the second injection.

It was always with words. Some grazed and stung, others struck deeper, lacerating and eviscerating. Even when words were withheld they struck with the biting sting of hot bath water on a fresh graze until the wound acclimatised.

“Can you feel anything?” asked the doctor.

Jack looked down to see the point of a needle pressing against the wound and shook his head.

“Won't take much longer.”

The needle entered the skin and Jack sensed rather than felt the slight tug of the black thread as it trailed behind the needle. The beginning of the healing process, drawing the sides of the open wound together, forcing two old friends who became enemies to reconcile their differences and embrace, forgiving the hurt and the pain. With time the rift would close leaving a faint raised line of hardened tissue.

He made every effort to choose his words carefully with his boys, to avoid careless words. Silence was another danger he recognised, not in the words withheld to manipulate, but words not spoken lest he cause damage.

From time to time his wife interjected, “You sound like your father,” when he failed in his best intentions and the wound tore open. It was said at his request to help him, not to criticise.

“There you are, all done,” said the doctor as he peeled off the surgical gloves.

Six black knots tied the edges of his skin. It reminded him of spider webs in the tensile strength of something so light holding together the strength of his skin.

“I'll put a water-proof bandage on it so you can shower. When was the last time you had a tetanus booster?”

Jack shrugged.

“I'll give you another because of the saw blade.”

“Bloody tetanus shot hurts worse than getting stitches,” said Jack.

“True. I'll send the nurse in for the shot. See your local doctor in about a week to have the stitches removed.”

Waiting for the nurse, Jack was left with the silence of the room as the bustle of the hospital moved passed the door in pedestrian fashion, desperate to see his wife and sons.

He spotted his wife and boys in the cafeteria, the detritus of a small feast laid out: an empty chip packet, crumpled muffin wrapper and two empty juice bottles. Kissing his wife on the cheek, he trailed his hand across her back as he crouched down between his boys, an arm on the back of each chair.

“How many stitches, Dad?”

“Six.”

“Can we see?”

“Not today. When I change the dressing I'll let you look. Hey boys, I love you.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

Two heads buried themselves into Jack's shoulders before returning to vacuuming the leftover crumbs from the table.