

# Scar

by Mark Krieger

I hitched my way up 101 along the California coast heading, the way the crow flies, towards San Francisco. It was cold and rained from the minute I left.

A week or so later I wound up in the Tenderloin district and the rain was there waiting for me. I spent the night curled and praying between the shrubs in a little squatter village somewhere around Union Street. I draped a plastic grocery bag over my head and listened to the endless patter.

I'd been on my own since I was 13, drifting like some gutternomad from city to city, sleeping where ever I could, eating whatever there was. My father left our family when we were little. From that day on my mother wept and our house seemed to sink into shadow that only grew thicker and deeper with each day. My mother always blamed my father for what happened to all of us. One person, she'd say, one act, has the power to save an entire life, an entire family, generations and generations, or to crucify them all. I'd listen to her and see the dark ripples beneath her eyes and silently assure myself that I was the savior type.

Up the street I found an all night diner where I drank burnt coffee and it was towards dawn that I ran into the girl-that-knocked-things-over.

She came in alone and looking a little lost as her gaze picked forlornly over the unfamiliar faces. When our eyes bumped together you could see something loosen inside her—she brightened, as though she'd stumbled upon something magic. But it was only me. She headed straight for my table and sat down, her knee banging beneath loudly.

She was a runaway and hustler too and, being a guy, it stung and shamed me that I was never able to explain to her that I wasn't this way by nature or choice.

She was a pale tough looking thing with long bleach blonde hair and where this creature drew its mangled energy from is one of the

wonders of the world. It exploded off her like a starburst. During the course of two hours she'd dumped a total of three coffees, a water, and in one insane sweep of the wrist sent a salt shaker sailing across the restaurant to its doom beneath a table.

I'm a klutz, she said, smacking her head. I'm a train wreck. I'm always like this. You'll see. Jesus. She stuck out a hand. I'm the girl-who-knocks-things-over. Everybody calls me Knocks. I've broken every bone in my body—*twice*. Ha ha. But too bad that's not all I break. Cuz I break people too. There's something good about you? get away, cuz I'll just smash it.

It's alright, I said. I haven't had my smashing for the day.

She stared at me in a moment of undecided wonder. Then she smiled. A ripple of sunlight. It made you forget everything.

We can't help the way we are, she said and for the first time all morning, calmly and quietly. So maybe that means we can't be blamed either, right?

\* \* \*

We walked together down the empty sidewalk. The first molten rays of sun pouring down the streets and alleyways, humming silently against the flanks of buildings, the still trees.

She noticed my taped up wrist. Really I wanted her see it. I'd been jabbing at it with a dirty thumbnail beneath the table all night as we talked. It'd turned yellow and looked on the brink of hatching something.

She stopped me by the arm, her mouth cocking. She stared not so much at the wound as into it. Her expression more wonder than horror. The wound seemed to glow in her presence like a crystal ball, lighting her face and eyes in some quiet revelation that seemed to tell her more about me than anything I knew.

How could someone let it get this bad? she said. You're infected. But what's worse is...

Her forehead tightened further. But she never finished. The moment grew awkward. She seemed to have changed her mind on something.

Hey, she said.

I looked up and her eyes were large and clear again, full of pity. She took my head in her hands and gazed so deeply into my eyes I felt myself go invisible.

I can help you, she said. I can. You'll be given a choice—twice. But I won't leave you hanging the way everybody does to me all the time. I'll be a mother to you. We'll get peroxide. Okay?

She slid her slender arm around me and the gentle fingers of her hand held the wound pointed forward, a sort of compass point guiding us along and as we walked down the sunlit streets.

You're gunna stay with me now, right? she said. The teasing warmth was back in her voice. Course you are. She punched me on the arm. Where else you gunna go? You have nowhere. You're fresh tenderloin for the lions bitch. Ha ha. She socked me again. She was one of those girls that punched people she liked. You can trust me though. I've turned over a new leaf. I've found God—in a restaurant—with his wrist slashed. Ha ha. He's depressed. He needs Zoloft so He can go on His redemption spree and heal the soul sick world. Ha ha ha. I'm jus shitnya— I didn't have anybody when I first got to Tenderloin. But the damned lions. So I know my man. I know.

We walked towards the motel where she was staying with some of the members of the Hell's Angels. She said they were gone much of the time running various scams around the city. She was convinced if they let her stay there they'd let me too. And they did.

\* \* \*

It was Knocks that gave me the spine to start working again. I hadn't turned a trick since Hollywood. What else was I going to do? I never had any luck spare changing and neither had Knocks.

We'd work the clubs and streets until around three in the morning. In the beginning we tried sticking together but quickly abandoned it. As it was in Hollywood, so it went in Frisco: fags and breeders prowled separate streets.

So early in the evening we went our ways. She often wore these tight-fitted denim jeans and I'd watch her backside drift away from me until the melodious vip vip vip of her inner thighs faded and she was lost in pools of shadow.

But we'd often meet up early the next morning and wandered together back to the motel just before the breaking light of dawn.

She was always trying to wrestle rolls of bills into my pocket. There was quite a discrepancy of what girls earned over guys.

It made me sick—the thought of taking her money. But I enjoyed battling this Herculean beauty whose crude affection, I knew, would return again and again. Typically it ended with one of us slamming our face into a street pole or the both of us tumbling off the curb into the street, knocking heads, the roll of bills planted in my pocket anyway. Later I'd slip it back in her pantyhose in her bag. To which she'd slip it back into my underwear.

Etc...

She knew everybody on the streets. One night we ran into Boo, a crusty gutterpunk, who warned her that her old pimp Jay was out of jail and looking for her. Later the same night we ran into a girl called Alley Cat who echoed a similar warning. Jay was something to think about.

\* \* \*

Jerry and Gregory, the Hell's Angels bikers, usually returned from their night of crime around 10 o'clock with coffee cans and stained hotel sheets leaden with coins. They had some key that unlocked parking meters. They'd wrap the stolen coins over breakfast and we'd go out, wandering the city until late afternoon. When we'd return they'd be gone again and we'd sleep more, or maybe make spaghetti (the only thing either of us knew how to make) with a broken pot and a pair of pliers.

She'd accused me of being the lousier cook. I'd tease her about being a ditz klutz. She'd punch me on the arm. I'd punch her back. We'd play spades and poker and smoke Lucky Strikes. She'd always win too because she cheated. So sometimes the card games ended with wrestling match, her body slamming me then pinning me to the floor with her knees. She'd slap my face and threaten to drop a luggie in my eye. And then she would drop a luggie in my eye. And I, in turn, kicked her against the wall...

So the days passed.

It was the longest I'd been off the streets in over a year.  
She was becoming less klutzy. I was starting to get my nerve  
back. Or maybe it was that I was getting my nerve at all.  
Something new in my life was cracking through the shell.

\* \* \*

It was when Murry arrived, another Hell's Angel, that trouble  
came.

Murry was a pill and rock fiend. He'd buoyed himself against the  
counter with a bottle of something and wait for us to pass, heading  
out the door. He'd pinch the tip of Knock's dress or t-shirt and try to  
reel her in for a dance. *Heeeey good lookin*, he sang. *Whaaat ya got  
cookin...*

She knocked him back against the counter so hard he bounced off  
it. She always refused him, no matter how many crumpled bills he  
tried piling down her top.

I can always find you on the streets, he said, staring at me while  
speaking to her. That's the way you wanna play it, Baby doll.

One morning while we were sleeping the whole bed began to  
creak and tip heavily towards Knock's side. I awoke to an unearthly  
screching and a crash.

I was halfway across the parking lot in my boxers before I  
stopped, realizing where I was, and that nothing was trailing me. Or  
maybe it was that I realized I was even running at all that stopped  
me.

I stood in the doorway, holding my knees. I couldn't get a breath.

I wish I could say that, yeah, ever since the Saint Louis DC and  
the Chicago YA, I'd been this way: The hands that find you in the  
darkness of night trail you like shadowy living things born of your  
deepest nightmare. But I think the roots of this issue went deeper  
than this.

The TV laid smashed on the floor. Murry and Knocks were  
bouncing off the walls, locked together like two warring screching  
ants.

The cataclysm is impossible to tear from my memory. It was the  
other side of her wonder, as horrible as the other benevolent.

Luckily Jerry happened in. He pinned Murry against the wall with one fist, Murry's feet scabbling a little off the floor. In the other fist he menaced a crooked Phillips screwdriver before Murry's grimacing face.

Jerry told Murry to get the fuck out and that if he ever came back, he'd sink this screwdriver straight through his retina.

Murry tested his bloodied cheek with his palm where she'd left her teeth marks. His nose bled into his lips. His neck was branded with a red hand print.

He stabbed the air with his pointer finger, explaining to each of us in turn. You're *fucked*. And you're *fucked*. And you're *fucked*.

\* \* \*

Why didn't you do anything? she asked.

I did, I lied. And then it was like—*shit*—Jerry came in and—*fuck*—I'm flying against the dresser. But I was gunna killm till Jerry came.

Lurid shapes were still hurtling themselves up from behind me, flickering then instantly vanishing out of the corner of my vision. My wrist tingled and throbbed.

She sat down at the lopsided card table silent, blinking.

I hoped that was the end of it. It wasn't.

There was a blur to my right. A bottle exploded against the dresser. I turned in time to witness the entire card table wheeling on end, empty bottles and ashtrays thundering against the wall.

She knocked me down and with both fists shook me against the carpet.

Don't ever *lie* to me you stupid fuck! I saw right through you day one!

I staggered after her into the darkness. A few blocks down I hooked her shoulder and we wrestled to the pavement beside some dumpsters. She tried crawling away, convulsing. I got my arm around her stomach and managed to pull her back into me. We laid there.

After a while the traffic down on the strip made itself known.

I'm sorry, she said.

Forget it.  
I didn't mean—all that  
I know.  
I hurt you?  
No.  
I'd rather hurt me than you.  
You didn't.

Sometimes I black out... Hard as I try not to, I see things in things—what people are capable of. Then they really happen. I shouldn't be so surprised. But people have that other side too. I can help bring out that side with you but you have to be strong enough to step forward when it's time. Do you understand what I'm telling you?

Yeah, I said, not at all understanding. I just wanted her to drop it. But if I ever hurt you I'd—

She didn't finish. She'd stood straight up, banging the back of her head against the iron corner of the dumpster. She clutched her head in both hands, her face gone Chinese.

Our eyes met.

Shut up, she said. You couldn't tell if she was laughing or crying. Don't even say it. God*damn* it. Not—a *fucking* thing.

\* \* \*

The first night we held each other in bed she wept. I don't think I mentioned this. She tried to do something for me but I told her No—Stop.

I was nervous and alert. She seemed nervous too—or something. It was just different this way than it was out on the streets.

Normally she slept with her clothes on. This time she'd crawled into bed wearing only her panties and a T-shirt. She was careful to hide her legs beneath the sheets. I pulled them away.

I knew well enough the chasm she'd crawled from. Up and down her hips and thighs were littered with round craters that I knew to be cigarette burns.

She lay on her side with her back turned to me. I stared at these meteor impacts, feeling far away, a lone sentient cloud admiring the scoured yet wondrous earth-of-this-girl below me, the lean slope of her side, the soft dip of her neck, the sharp edge of her cheekbone, the monarch wing of her eyelash, a wing which worked regularly, counting off time by its own dreamy measure.

Finally her cheek turned.

You can hold me—if you want.

I fidgeted around. I couldn't figure out where to put my arm. I felt like a broken statue against her, stiff and all out of place. I was careful not to breathe on her face. Had a fly rubbed its fingers together on the far side of the room at that moment it would've sent me catapulting for the door.

Knocks, meanwhile, lay perfectly still. So I lay still.

Then I started to feel something. At the time it would've been hard to piece into words what exactly. Some secret window had opened inside her and I felt some part of me growing and expanding in the warm bliss that was pouring through as might a plant in sunlight.

My arm eased against her soft side. Her heart knocked into the cup of my hand. I noticed my own heart sounding back.

It was then that she made the noise. Her head sank into the pillow.

She wept.

Why she cried that night, I'll never know. If it was for me that she wept or the memory and feeling of someone else... Or was she seeing in me again, as she had that first morning when she gazed into my scared wrist, something ominous, sad, irreversible, through the betrayal of my close flesh?

Probably it was all these of things.

\* \* \*

That was the night she showed me her darkest wound, although it wasn't anything you could see or touch with your fingers. No. Not that night. It was the night Murry attacked her and I lied and there was the chase down the dark streets.



I remember there was a meteor shower and we leaned back against the dumpster side-by-side sharing cigarettes to watch them tumble into the dark still palms above us.

Her mother had been killed by her stepfather (who raped and sexually tortured the girl-that-knocked-things-over) in ways that are better left unsaid. Her mother, before she was found face down at the bottom of the basement steps, once played the cello for Knocks. She was blind and, as a little girl, whenever Knocks was upset, lost to the world, her mother would take the cello and bow from its worn ancient case. The cello had been passed down from her mother and her mother's mother. And so on. Close your eyes, she'd say to Knocks. Something beautiful passed from generation to generation. You could feel it in the weightless aqua of Knock's eyes, the softness of her easy touch. It would always be there in her. This song of sorts. Someday she'd have a child and this song would go on.

What my mother taught me went deeper than words, she said. Words are up here. She tapped my temple with her finger. What she gave me was better than that.

She touched my chest, holding her hand there. Close your eyes...

There, she said. Right there. You feel it?

Yeah, I said.

But I didn't feel anything. Anyway, not what she was trying to make me feel...

It just wasn't there. And I think we both understood this deep down and maybe that's what burns me most now. If I could return again to that night, knowing what I know now, knowing I'd end up in a place like this, I'd take her hand and I'd say: It's not your fault, you wonderful creature. You tried. It's just not in me, you see? It's not there. It never was and never will be. There's something else there that no amount of peroxide will ever fix. It's not your fault. Go on and get out of here before it's too late. Find someone who has it in them from the start. They'll know what to do with it.

Do you feel it? she asked again. And all the way down.

I didn't say anything. In my head I saw my mother towards the end. She was hurrying out the door, heading again for the street

corner. From the windowsill my little sister and I'd watch her until she vanished into a car. One morning she vanished on the corner and we never saw her again. Before she slipped into the car that last time, she gave our apartment one last glance. It was only a few seconds, this glance, but within it (and for the first and only time) there might've been something of what you'd call nurturing, soft. Maybe it was for us, this miracle of her expression, and that she sensed deep down it'd be the last we'd all see each other. Maybe she wanted to leave us with something of her wasted heart that she was otherwise unable to ever give... More likely it was only selfishness. Only a deeper sense of her own sadness for herself, this gaze. Seeing in us (who, with each day our faces were melding more and more into the contours of our father's, the same faces that were gazing back at her through the window) her own unbearable loneliness.

I guess, she continued, she was the only person in my life I've ever been able to trust.

She grew quiet. I could see her staring at me from the corner of my eye. She seemed so alone. I didn't know what to say.

Maybe you did try to help me tonight, she said finally. I was seeing in blurs. Maybe I just didn't see.

She gave me a lopsided smile. Hope soured with sadness. I looked away. I knew she was lying to me and she knew I knew. But Knocks understood my life without my ever speaking a word. She knew all she needed to know that first morning peering into my scar. Yet she helped me anyway.

I knew I should've left that night. I knew it was time. But I couldn't tear myself away. An act darker than merely selfish.

A star speared above us, then exploded into soft powdery shards of light, vanishing forever. Others roamed alone, tumbling slowly from who-knew-where and going who-knew-where.

You're a good kid, she said. She dipped her head against my shoulder, her arm looping through mine. We both are.

\* \* \*

The plan was to head north all the way to Portland where she said she had friends. We had money stashed away. I jacked a Chevy and parked it a few blocks down from the motel. The body was rusted out and the lopsided frame hitched wildly from side-to-side when you accelerated beyond 45. I figured no one would miss it till after we'd ditched it in Oregon.

It was our last night working the streets. We headed back to the motel early to grab our packs and to leave a note thanking Jerry and Gregory for everything. Rounding Bellway we stopped. Squads were parked in front of our hotel doorway, their lights splattering against everything.

Murry, mumbled Knocks.

Our life savings, everything we owned, was now the property of the San Francisco Police Department.

We hustled for the Chevy, taking a side street we didn't normally use. A light drizzle began. As we passed an alley the voices that'd been echoing steadily suddenly dropped away. The pack of them turning towards us.

We were silent and kept walking. I felt Knock's hand take mine. It was the hand with the scar that she helped nurse that first morning. The wrist throbbed.

I closed my eyes. I tried to pray. A foster mother taught me this. But inside my head a melted face materialized. The warped head of an old corpse floating in the inky jar of formaldehyde that was my mind. Its nose and eyes and lips were eaten away by some disease. My eyes opened but the face lingered in my vision as would the imprint of a sun glare.

The group of gutters tailed closer behind. I could see each face without turning around. I may as well have been back in the Saint Louis DC or the Chicago YA. Look in a mirror and there we were. Born of dark desperation we wandered the fringes of the earth, a breath fading against a mirror, our souls forever escaping our bodies. To hurt deeper for what'd been done to us and for what never was or would be.

A voice came from behind.

Hey, *Knocks*. Been looking aaall over for you.

A cackle travelled the group.

*Knocks* kept walking.

When'd you get out Jay?

One voice laughed stupidly.

When am I ever out, Baby? See you gotta new sucker here.

I turned and smiled at him.

Fuck you Jay, said *Knocks*. But I could see she was shaking.

You got it backwards, Sweetie.

Cackles.

What'd you do time for ? I asked Jay, the smile still nailed to my jaw. He said nothing. What'd you do time for? I repeated louder.

I'm sorry, said Jay. Spam, you hear something? He tugged at his ear, blinking stupidly up at the night. Swore I heard a liddle birdie.

Nope. Nothing.

The birdie asked you what you did time for—huh?

Someone halked a luggie and spat. I felt it tap the back of my hoodie.

For that!

They all roared.

Someone knuckled me hard against the back of the skull.

And that!

The group swallowed around us. Jay got me in a headlock and swung me around backwards, his tattered leather jacket choking off my breath. The others cornered *Knocks* against the building, putting their hands all over her as she twisted and tore about.

I got 90 days for the molestation of a cheeseburger, said Jay. That's what they called it. 90 *fucking* days for tossing the pickles on a sidewalk! You believe that? *Huh—?*

I couldn't get any air.

Listen, said Jay. I'm like Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. Cuz I'm gunna redeem you from this skankhole—*who*—my misguided and naive friend—is about to rip your dumb ass off—the way she ripped my ass off—the way she rips everyone's ass off. But that's OK. Cuz we're gunna take it outta her 2 dollar ass tonight. Ain't we sailors?

They were.

He stopped. Lemmie guess, you were going south—no, north. She wanted to go north. Live with *friends*. He cackled then spit flem. She was gunna leave you for the birds, Oliver. Me? I'm a fare Joe, arni guys?

He was.

They struggled to drag Knocks down the alley.

So, continued Jay, I'm gunna forgive you and let you get the fuck outta here without anything too broken. Consider yourself—very lucky my little chickadee. Ever see you around here again though—

*Ya*— I said. *Ya*—

Promice...

Prom—s—

He whistled. Two legs came scissoring my way, something metal in a fist. Two white hot blasts flooded my head. I hit the street.

Blood spilled down my shirt.

Behind there came a thundering splatter of motorcycles. I squinted into the inferno of headlights. They pulled slowly to a stop against the curb.

Well well well well well, said a familiar voice through the blaze. It was Murry. When we meet again.

\* \* \*

He moved his kickstand down with the heel of his boot. He and the others swung calmly off their bikes. He and Jay knew each other and apparently not in any good way. However they both had old scores to settle with Knocks. The mutual recognition of the score likely forgave whatever difference.

Murry gazed at me from across the street. A dark haze stood between us, warping his face. He pulled a small revolver from his waist. He touched the bore against his temple then lowered the muzzle on me. He flashed his tooth-missing-grin, knowing everything I was worth and everything he was worth and everything she was worth. He feigned a shot.

Jay's fading falsetto voice echoed down the alley amid her screams.

...Now I've gone and molested skanky old whores before like this one. But I've never gone and fucked around with no fucking *cheeseburgers*...

In the alley darkness, I watched them tear at her clothes. A pack of jackals tearing the hide from some thrashing animal on its spine. Her shouts, her pleads were soon smothered beneath Murry's leather jacket.

It was my name that she called and called. But it wasn't my real name. I had warrants in numerous states. From a labyrinth of institutions I came and a labyrinth of institutions I'd return.

I ran.

I stopped only once, awestruck by the warped face reflected in a storefront window. I stood there a moment, gazing into the dark tunnels of its missing eyes, feeling myself plummet down into them like a stone down the throat of a well, deep where I could never be found again.

The wrist had healed but the poison had seeped into the darkest corner. The creature lurking beneath fattened. Jay, Spam, Murry, my father, my mother, and the multitudes of others like us in cities and suburbs, wandering highway sides—it was too late for us. Our wounds too old and deep to close and light the way ahead.

I ran on.

I didn't look back, not with my eyes.

Somewhere near the city limits where I was clear, I found a payphone and made the anonymous call.

\* \* \*

I hustled along the shoulder of freeway. But everything had already caught up with me. I couldn't run anymore. The eyes of a semi broke the black horizon ahead. I kept my pace. The headlights bloomed larger and larger, igniting sheets of rain.

How simple it was: two blind legs stepping of their own two paces to the right and you've vanished. Like a cheap magician's trick. Like a mother that was never there anyway...

...A voice whispers my name. Someone is screaming. I realize in a slow disjointed way it is me who is screaming. Screaming your name... Screaming it from some lost dream inside my head...

Knocks.

I was already broken when you found me.

Wherever you are.

