



MidCenturyPage.com

SCAR OF LOVE

Just as she had kept her body perfect and unmarked,
she had never let love really touch her or
ever dreamed how proudly a woman can wear its scar

BY MACDONALD HARRIS ILLUSTRATED BY FREDRIC VÁRADY

Except for the scratch on her arm, which was a trivial mishap, the day began exactly like the others. When Malcolm was away in town she seldom dressed for breakfast; in negligee and slippers she took her coffee on the small flagstone terrace where oleanders grew in profusion in the desert shade. After breakfast, in her dressing-room, she slipped off the gown and negligee and spent half an hour arranging her hair into the tight pompadour drawn at the back into a symmetrical Empire knot held with a black velvet ribbon. Then, standing before the mirror, she drew on the Bikini, noting with satisfaction how precisely it covered the two white patches that were the only imperfections in the smooth and even tan that covered her body. Outside, the chaise longue waited at the bottom of the garden where the desert sun reflected hotly off the rock wall, the home of innumerable spiders and of the lizards that devoured them with lightning flashes of their tongues. Dora, the Mexican maid, had already gone out to arrange the sacred objects of the ritual: the oil, the thermos of ice-water, the clean white sheet over the chaise pad, the chromium kitchen-timer which regulated her exposure front and back to exactly one half-hour. It is easy for anyone who works in the sun to become tanned, but Elizabeth's coloring was something else: The Expensive Tan, the kind that is achieved only through long patience and infinite attention to detail.

This morning it was Saturday, the day when Malcolm drove out from Los Angeles to stay the weekend. He usually arrived around lunchtime, and she had lingered a little too long over breakfast;

it was perhaps for this reason that she was slightly more hurried than usual, and failed to notice the long frond of primrose that had fallen away from the fence and hung over the path. When she felt the slight sting on her arm she turned with a faint sound of exasperation. It was not a bad scratch; the thorn had left an almost invisible white line against the translucent brown of her skin, a line that gradually turned pink as she rubbed it. But for some reason Elizabeth's annoyance was out of proportion to the mishap; she felt irrationally that the slight blemish irreparably marred the complexion over which she had labored so patiently for so many months. It was like the first scratch on an automobile, after which the car is no longer new. "Dora!" she called in vexation. She tried to fasten up the branch herself but she was afraid of scratching her fingers.

At last Dora appeared, wiping her hands complacently on her apron.

"Where's Luis?" Elizabeth demanded. "Have him come and tie up this branch. Do you see? It's scratched me."

Dora gazed upon the scratch with slightly amused indifference. "He's gone to do marketing. Should I tie it up?"

"Yes. All right," said Elizabeth impatiently.

Dora took the branch in her long fingers and twined it safely away among the others, giving it a final touch to arrange the flowers before she let it go. She was tall, lazy, dignified, and statuesque, as only the women of Tehuantepec are; she performed her servant's duties with a negligent grace, like a Marie Antoinette playing at being a milkmaid. Elizabeth and Malcolm had found her waiting on tables barefooted in an

Oaxaca restaurant, a few years before, and had hired her on the spot, even making arrangements for her passage to California. She had submitted calmly and with dignity, bringing with her Luis, who could do many different things imperfectly and who managed to pass for a gardener. Elizabeth assumed they were married, although she had never demanded to see their papers. They were ideal servants in many ways, but there was something about Dora that had always annoyed Elizabeth. Nothing specific, nothing that could be put into words, perhaps only her manner, her stately and bovine complacency in which Elizabeth thought she detected a faint trace of irony. She watched her, her arms arched gracefully as she tied back the branch. She was wearing her usual costume, a white blouse with curved neckline, and for the first time Elizabeth noticed the scar: an uneven white gash an inch or so long, above her breast where the pectoral muscle swelled upward into the arm. It was a primitive wound, a mark that might have been left by a spear-thrust or the flint head of an arrow. Elizabeth found herself staring at it with a distaste mingled with fascinated curiosity. Then she heard Dora inquire, in her customary tone, "Do you want some medicine on the scratch?"

"No," she said. "That'll be all."
"Then I'll go fix lunch," said Dora simply, retreating with dignity and leaving her mistress to the incomprehensible ritual of the sunbath.

Later, lying with her eyes closed in the beating sun while the perspiration trickled into her armpits, Elizabeth realized what it was about the girl that

Tanning her body to perfection was a ritual. She lay motionless for hours, thinking of nothing.



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irritated her. No one, she thought, had a right to a skin like that who had not labored over it. Dora seldom ventured into the sun, and yet her skin was the same perfect shade of amber that Elizabeth had achieved only through months of patience. And her heavy, dark hair that hung of its own weight and never seemed to need combing, her heavy pale-rose, symmetrical lips . . . Elizabeth, suppressing her annoyance, heard the peremptory ping of the timer; she turned obediently over onto her stomach and felt the sun gradually sink into her back, dissolving away the lingering traces of her vexation.

Malcolm arrived ahead of schedule; she was still taking her sunbath when she heard his car in the driveway. As usual he had driven too fast; he had covered the hundred and twenty miles from Pasadena to Palm Springs in a little more than two hours. It was typical of him, she thought, to drive eighty miles an hour to get to Palm Springs and then find he had nothing to do when he got there; he would loaf around the house, restless and bored, until four o'clock came and he could have his first cocktail. She raised herself with a small sigh as he came down the pathway, immaculate in his tropical suit and open-work shoes, getting slightly heavy around the middle now as befitted a man who was moving into the upper tax brackets. They kissed cautiously, he careful to avoid getting sun-tan oil on his lightweight silk poplin suit, and she careful not to smear her precisely applied lipstick. Then he took out a cigarette and lit it leisurely, scarcely glancing at her nearly naked body covered with a thin film of oil and perspiration.

"I asked the Oberlies to come down for cocktails and dinner. Also the De Pauws; they're staying at the Desert Inn for the weekend anyhow."

"All right," she said with a slight trace of annoyance.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Sure?"

"Yes, of course!" she said, a little sharply. And there was nothing the matter; everything was just as usual. The day was ordinary and the kiss was like all the other kisses they had exchanged when he had arrived for the weekend. It was like the rest of their lives: indifference, covered with a politely correct veil of convention. Malcolm was an ideal husband, just as Dora was an ideal maid. He was a partner in a successful industrial-consulting firm; his business was lucrative and not too

demanding, and it was easy enough for him to get away on weekends and sometimes even to spend a week in the desert. He had bought her the desert house so she could live there and escape the rainy winter months in the city, which she hated, asking only that she entertain his business friends once in a while on weekends. Apart from that, Malcolm left her to live her own life. It would have been an exaggeration to say they were in love, but after all they were both in their late thirties and beyond the age of passion. They were sensible, successful, attractive people, resembling the people Malcolm invited down for weekends; if the others didn't have desert houses in Palm Springs they had beach houses in Laguna, and the wives were all evenly tanned and the husbands drove too fast. There was nothing at all wrong with their lives that you could point to, unless it was that Elizabeth couldn't sleep at night without barbiturates and that their liquor bill was almost as large as Dora's wages. But that, as Malcolm explained, came off the gross for tax purposes.

And yet Elizabeth could not convince herself that she anticipated the evening with pleasure. It was too predictable, too much like all the other Saturday nights in Palm Springs. The Oberlies and the De Pauws. Gilbert Oberlie was one of Malcolm's biggest clients, an aircraft executive in his fifties, florid, patronizingly jolly with women, amiable unless Malcolm happened to cross him in a conversation, when he had a tendency to bristle in the manner of a customer who expects his views to be treated with respect. Gertrude Oberlie was a nonentity, the kind of an executive wife whose personality was totally submerged in her husband's business. The De Pauws were old college friends; Malcolm still golfed with Frank occasionally, but Elizabeth knew he invited them to the house only because he was interested in Beatrice, and had been for many years. It had never come to anything and never would, she knew; it was a kind of permanent semifacetious flirtation that everyone concerned took for granted. After he had a couple of drinks Malcolm might stroll with Beatrice down to the bottom of the garden and kiss her under the rock wall, but he would come back in five minutes. He would come back in five minutes because Gilbert Oberlie was always there, or somebody else who might be mildly scandalized, and it would be bad for business. You could almost hear Malcolm thinking, "If I lost my head about Beatrice it might get in the papers, and people don't like that sort of thing—a scan-

dal. It might mean a couple of thousand or so off the gross. A big price for a little playing around—it isn't worth it." And it wasn't, Elizabeth had to admit; Malcolm was a mature and sensible person. But that was why he went on inviting the De Pauws on weekends, even though Frank wasn't one of his clients.

About all of this Elizabeth and Malcolm had a tacit agreement to be civilized. Elizabeth was content; she had accepted the terms, and she lived her own life. She had never wanted children; she had a horror of anything that might ruin her figure. She asked only to have a nice house, to be able to buy good clothes, and to live in Palm Springs during the winter. Malcolm bought her a new car every couple of years.

After lunch Elizabeth made a list of things for canapés, and sent a grumbling Luis out shopping for the second time that day. They generally took dinner guests to the Tennis Club, since Dora was hardly up to a full-scale dinner, so all she had to decide on was the cocktails. Manhattans, she decided, with bourbon-and-water for Gilbert, who had a tendency to dyspepsia. There was nothing else to do; she read a magazine for a while, and, about three o'clock, she went into the kitchen to mix the spreads for the canapés. Dora was unpacking the groceries from the bags. She was wearing the same blouse she had worn that morning, and in spite of herself Elizabeth found herself stealing furtive glances at the scar over her breast. Finally Dora noticed her glance, and pulled up the hem of her blouse.

"Where did you get that?" Elizabeth asked her.

"Madam?"

"The scar."

Dora glanced down at the mark, her finger passing over it casually. "Luis," she explained.

"He struck you?"

"Yes. He does, sometimes."

"But surely—a terrible gash like that," asked Elizabeth with a faint skeptical superiority. "He didn't do it with his hand?"

"It was not his fault. He was wearing his ring, and he forgot. It is a heavy ring with a stone, and it is rather sharp. After that he always remembered, and took the ring off."

"But why should he—strike you?" persisted Elizabeth.

"Oh, we get, you know, mad," explained Dora complacently. "Like everybody. He goes with another woman, or he does something foolish, and I complain and I tell him he is no good, and we fight,

"Kiss your own wife," she cried, and savagely let him have it.

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and after a while he hits me. I scratch, too; sometimes I hurt him. I am not strong enough to hit hard, but I can scratch. Any woman can do that. Sometimes the blood comes. Then afterwards it is all right, and we make friends."

"Then you—" Elizabeth groped for the appropriate term "—love him anyhow?"

"He is a good man," explained Dora logically. "He works hard, when he works. And he gives me pleasure. A man is to give pleasure to a woman. If you have a man and he doesn't give pleasure to you, what good is he?"

"What indeed?" murmured Elizabeth. "And you think the pleasure is worth all the—fights and scratches?"

"It might be better if he didn't hit me," admitted Dora. "But it is good sometimes, to fight. You are all poison inside, hate, hate, hate. And then, hit hard and yell, and when you see the blood you feel better, and then you are friends."

The conversation that Elizabeth had begun in a kind of fastidious and amused superiority left her oddly troubled; the rest of the afternoon, as they worked together in the kitchen, she glanced at Dora covertly as though she were seeing her for the first time. It was as though she had looked at some familiar household pet, a lazy Persian cat, and seen in her something previously unsuspected, a hint of atavistic jungle ferocity behind the soft fur and the languid movements. It was an amusing story to be repeated to friends later, a cocktail anecdote. She could imagine the facile murmured comments: *Latin temperament, you know . . . like children . . . genuine primitives . . . their emotions are all on the surface.* But perhaps, Elizabeth thought to herself, yielding for a moment to the always-lurking hectic discontent, that was where emotions were supposed to be.

Later, when she went out to the garage to get something out of her car, she passed Luís in the garden and glanced at him with new curiosity. He was a thin and intense Mexican of uncertain age, with an impassive leathery face and a pair of hands sinewy and sun-scorched, like the claws of some powerful bird. Noticing that her glance lingered for an instant, he stared back at her with an unmoved calm that bordered on insolence. His gaze affected her in the same way as did the sight of a crow or a raven rising from a fencepost into the white desert heat. A little shiver arose in her back and spread through her body, as though the approaching evening had already brought with it a gust of cold; and in spite of herself she could not help realizing that the sensation was not entirely unpleasant.

The evening began successfully, at least on the surface; the Manhattans

were excellent, and Gilbert was flattered that they had remembered the bourbon-and-water for him. In the background Dora moved around with a stately and exotic dignity, offering the canapés that everyone declared were delicious. Elizabeth sat a little apart from the others, watching her cocktail hour unroll smoothly and taking a small private satisfaction in its perfection. But she still felt traces of her vague restlessness; after two Manhattans she still felt the same: sober, coldly lucid, and conscious of a half-repressed irritability. When the second round of drinks was finished they went in Gilbert's car to the Tennis Club, where nobody ever played tennis and where the chief attractions were the heated pool illuminated from underwater at night, the lavish bar with a mosaic by a famous French cubist, and the dinners which invariably consisted of expensive cuts of steak seared with the black iron marks of the grill. She had eaten that dinner, she thought, a hundred times, and yet Malcolm never failed to exult fatuously over the thickness of the steak ("Say, that's a piece of meat for you, isn't it?"), as though any butcher couldn't cut a steak a foot thick if he wanted to, and if somebody was fool enough to pay for it. It was a meal, she thought, that might have been relished by a savage: a piece of beef seared over an open fire, some lettuce-leaves with dressing on them, an unpeeled potato baked in an oven and filled with sour cream. She mentally contrasted it with the food that Dora and Luís cooked for themselves in her kitchen: the crisp fragile *tacos*, the *tostados* with their complex medley of textures and flavors, the delicate ragout of spiced chicken with green peppers. Who were the savages, she thought drily, Dora and Luís with their *pollo con arroz*, or the diners at the Tennis Club with their grilled beef?

"Something wrong with the steak?" Malcolm inquired.

"No, it's delicious," she insisted brightly.

"It better be good, because actually this dinner is in the nature of a celebration," he announced nonchalantly. "A little conjugal milestone. I have a notion Liz has forgotten—have you, Liz?—the fifteenth of February."

With a sudden rush of vexation she realized she had forgotten; she had marked their tenth anniversary on the calendar, even tentatively decided on a small gift for Malcolm, but the date had crept up on her. It annoyed her that Malcolm, suspecting that she had forgotten, had brought it up in front of the others as if deliberately trying to embarrass her. "This is a switch," commented Frank. "In the funny papers it's supposed to be

the husband who forgets the anniversary. What happened, Liz? More important things on your mind?"

"Come on, Liz," laughed Malcolm, "how about a kiss for the old man after ten years." She turned up her face dutifully; there were small hurrahs from the others. Then, as their lips met, Malcolm noticed that the other diners had stopped eating and were turning toward their table with a kind of jocular curiosity; he finished off with a perfunctory peck and turned away quickly and awkwardly, imagining himself as the strangers saw him, merely a well-dressed man kissing a pretty woman in the dining room of the Tennis Club—in short, making a spectacle of himself. Elizabeth felt a kind of an exasperation growing in her, not because she had been kissed in public, or because she had been kissed ineptly, but because Malcolm had abandoned the kiss in the middle because of what others, strangers, might think. She had an impulse to shout, "It's all right. He's my husband, and it's quite conventional to kiss your wife on the occasion of your tenth anniversary." But instead she only smiled woodenly.

After dinner they went back to the house; it was a mild evening for February, and they sat outside. There were more Manhattans, more facetious innuendoes about the monotony of living with the same woman for ten years. Elizabeth drank very little; she was feeling oddly detached, listening to the others absently, as though she were overhearing the conversation of strangers. After about an hour, when she went into the house for more ice, she entered the kitchen suddenly and found Malcolm and Beatrice conversing in furtive whispers behind the door, their heads bent close together. At the sink Dora was complacently washing glasses as though she were alone in the room. When they caught sight of her, Malcolm and Beatrice quickly drew apart, and Beatrice greeted her brightly. "Wonderful party, Liz dear," she tinkled.

"Thanks, darling."

"And darling, your tan is glorious. What's your secret?"

"A kitchen-timer. A half an hour on each side, every day."

"How clever!" laughed Beatrice, a little self-consciously. She pulled Malcolm back outside; he followed her rather sheepishly, and Elizabeth was left alone in the kitchen with Dora. When Elizabeth turned she found Dora standing with the tea-towel in her hands, regarding her calmly, with a kind of amused contempt; it seemed to Elizabeth that she wore the scar on her breast like a badge. *He goes with another woman, and we fight; I am not strong enough to hit*

hard, but I can scratch. But it's not so simple for us, the Anglo-Saxons, Elizabeth wanted to tell her.

When she came out onto the lanai with the loaded ice-bucket, she walked straight into Gilbert's embrace. He had drunk a little too much, and his face was flushed. "Where's that little girl who lived for ten years with the same man?" he demanded, holding her with a large arm around her. "Hero Wife—ought to have a medal. Give us a kiss, Liz—come on, now—"

Elizabeth was cold sober, and her nerves were tense and alert; Gilbert smelled of liquor, tobacco, and bad digestion. She knew that all she had to do was kiss him once, playfully, and it would be over. He would be flattered, and he would go around saying, with middle-aged vanity, "She's a grand kid, Liz is, always a good sport." She could almost hear Malcolm whispering in her ear: *Do it, go on and do it, it's worth a thousand a year on the gross.* But at that moment the little spark of rebellion that had been smoldering inside her all day finally exploded, and she had had enough. "Let me go." She swung savagely at Gilbert. "Go kiss your own wife." She slipped out of his clumsy grasp, catching a glimpse of his pink face in the half-darkness, his mouth fallen open with astonishment.

"What's the matter with you?" Malcolm asked her in a low voice. She felt his hand gripping her arm from behind. "Come on, get hold of yourself."

"You let go of me too," she told him, wrenching away from him. "I tell you I'm tired of playing this dreary little game. You won't kiss me in a public restaurant because people might stare, but when I refuse to kiss one of your clients, who happens to have bad breath, you act as though I've lost my mind. You don't care who kisses me, because you're only interested in kissing Beatrice. You've had a crush on her for years, but all you do is kiss her behind the kitchen door; if you did anything more it might be bad for business."

"I suppose this is what is called hysterics," she heard Beatrice remarking drily.

"You mean I'm saying what I think," she shot back. "That's the heresy, the unforgivable sin, isn't it? It's all right to do, but not to talk about." She saw Beatrice's chin tremble, a barely perceptible tremor passing over the corners of her mouth. "Look at her, Malcolm. She's a bundle of nerves. Why don't you do something about her, something real, or else leave the poor girl alone? My God, you've been flirting with her for six or seven years now; you must both be bored to death with the whole thing. Is that all you want out of life, to

kiss Beatrice behind the door, and let Gilbert kiss me so you can keep his fat account, and drink too many Manhattans—"

Malcolm grabbed her again, this time hard. "Listen. *You shut up.* Right now," he told her. He was trying to turn her around so he could face her and bring her to her senses, but she struggled in his grasp like some small furious animal. She felt a reckless exuberance, a strength rising in her; she was suddenly aware of the potency of her weapons, her fingernails, the sharp points of her heels. Malcolm had hold of her arm and was pulling it backward; it hurt, and with a sudden gasp of rebellion she tore loose and flung her arm in a wide arc, catching him clumsily on the side of the head. He staggered backward, groping for her in the air; when he finally managed to seize her by the wrist it threw her off balance and she fell heavily, whirling on the lever of her arm like an inanimate weight. Malcolm stood back, frightened, but she got up almost immediately. The rough flagstones had torn her knee; a flap of skin hung loose, and the blood was beginning to form in little pinpoints. As the others watched in dumb silence she got up, with a cold glance of scorn at Malcolm, and went into the house.

"**S**he's drunk," she heard Frank insisting *sotto voce*.

"No, I tell you she's cold sober," answered Malcolm, shaken.

Elizabeth scarcely heard them; she went into her bedroom and closed the door, feeling the exhausted exultation of a sixteen-year-old girl who has just dived off the high board in front of a dumbfounded crowd of spectators. Malcolm followed her almost immediately. "Get out," she warned him.

"Listen, Liz—"

"Get out!" she repeated. She looked around her for something to throw, and finally seized a bottle of suntan oil. He backed away in alarm, but she flung it, accurately and hard, and caught him square on the forehead over the eye. He half-fell, half-backed out of the door, leaving her in possession of the bedroom. "I tell you," she heard him telling the others through the closed door, "I don't know what's come over her—she's out of her mind."

"She'll get over it," Gilbert consoled him. "Don't you worry, Malcolm boy. By George, I think she was right. A woman isn't out of her mind just because she doesn't want to kiss your customers. Anybody tried to kiss Gertrude in my presence I'd paste him one, client or no client. I tell you, Malcolm, I envy you. I like a woman with spirit." His voice was suffused with a complacent mascu-

line tolerance. "Most of these women," he added in confidence, with a trace of wistfulness, "are about as spontaneous as an I.B.M. machine."

Finally they were gone. There was a long silence, and then she heard Malcolm knocking tentatively on the door. "Listen, Tiger. Can I come in now?"

"Yes," she told him. "If you behave yourself."

"If I behave myself," he breathed. "Holy Moses, you left a lump on my head like an egg."

He came in and glanced at her cautiously; she was sitting on the edge of the bed applying an enormous adhesive plaster to her knee. It was the first time since she was a kid, she thought; a trickle of bright crimson appeared under the edge of the adhesive, and it was strange to realize how long it had been since she had seen her own blood. Malcolm stood by, watching with a kind of awkward concern as she finished the bandage. She remembered the sensation of his hands gripping her shoulders; she had not realized he could hold her so hard. It gave her an odd and frightening sensation of fragility, as though he could take her in his hands and break her like a china doll whenever he wanted to. The moment was oddly pleasurable. She remembered something else Dora had said: *A man is to give pleasure to a woman. If you have a man and he doesn't give pleasure to you, what good is he?*

"Do you know," she asked him, "that I've wanted to throw something at you for ten years?"

"Good," he grinned. "Why didn't you before?"

"I didn't know that was what I wanted."

"You feel better now?" he said ironically.

"Much."

He was still dazed; he felt his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Anyhow, you broke up the party," he admitted, not without admiration. "The funny thing was that Gilbert didn't seem offended at all. Treated the whole thing as a joke. Said he liked a woman with spirit."

He stopped, looking down reflectively at the graceful curve of her long brown legs under her skirt, which she had pulled up to fix her knee. "I don't suppose we'll be seeing the De Pauws for a while, but that Beatrice is a silly piece of fluff anyhow. Always darling this and darling that. Besides, she's got a figure like a hockey player." He paused. "Still," he added ruefully after a moment, "it's a hell of a way to celebrate your tenth wedding anniversary."

"What other way did you have in mind?" she asked him.

THE END