

Scars

Jampa's earliest scar, a spiral. He is seven, and he lives on Arlington Avenue in Kensington. He is riding a racing scooter, a Flexi-flyer, down a hill, and he catches his right ring finger in the brake mechanism. Peels back a nasty flap of skin in the soft pad of flesh above the first knuckle. The searing pain of torn and bruised flesh, the shock of seeing his blood gushing from an open wound—so odd we are full of liquids. Screaming up the street, he stops for a minute and sticks the bloody mess in a puddle of water on the pavement to be sure the end of his finger is still there. Reassured it is, he dashes home, and his mom wraps his hand in a towel and takes him to the hospital. His first stitches. Six of them. He is an initiate now.

A rock gouges the palm of Jampa's hand. He is riding his first horse, Patches, a Paint, long in the tooth. They are late getting home and pushing it. Coming up Robinson Drive in the Oakland hills at a full gallop, Patches hit a patch of gravel. All four legs go out from under him, which catapults Jampa into a ditch and on top of a pile of lathe and innumerable small nails that pierce him all over. His left hand hits the pavement, and sharp gravel punctures his palm. Jampa's wind is knocked out, and he lays there, while Patches clammers to his feet and begins to chew on some grass. His dog, Spot, licks his face which gives him encouragement, as he crawls on his hands and knees. When the world quits spinning, he pulls himself loose from the sticks that are attached to his clothes. He opens his pocketknife and digs the pebble out of his flesh. His shirt is torn, and there are scratches and tiny, bloody wounds, but nothing seems broken, so he gathers up the reins and hobbles home, leading his horse. Outside of a nasty gouge in his palm, the rest of his wounds are superficial and clean up with dabs of peroxide. The hole in his hand is not bad enough for stitches, or at least he did not go to have it stitched, and it heals up to form a heart-shaped scar.

When Jampa is nine, he gets over a hundred stitches after nearly cutting his thumb off. He was living on his cousin's farm in Iowa for the summer, and he was having a great time milking cows, driving a tractor, and riding in the bin of the combine. He is a greenhorn, but he does have chores. Late afternoon. The men have been cutting hay and are putting it up loose in the loft of a barn. A hot day. Jampa's job is to stand at the back of the barn and relay a signal to the tractor driver to let him know when he should back up or come forward. He is wearing bib overalls and an engineer's cap that is a couple of sizes too big for him. The cap has a safety pin in the back, but it is still loose, and it falls off, and when he bends over to pick it up, he puts his hand on the rope to steady himself, and his thumb goes into the pulley. He pulled his hand out of there fast, but the pulley pinched off the flesh to the bone. Now, this is pain. This is crippling. After this, nothing ever hurts again. Eventually, the thumb heals, and the nail becomes a claw with which Jampa can open cans and dig through brick walls. The nerves are only partly restored, so he has to check for damage whenever he hits his thumb with a hammer.

A three-inch scar on the inside of his right ankle and a four-inch scar on the outside of the ankle where he had pins and plates installed on his fibula and tibia. It all happened fast. One minute he was nailing a tarp to the ridge line of a roof in the rain in his rain gear, and the next minute he was airborne, after

sailing down a water slide he had created—the Wrong Brothers. Landed flat-footed on the concrete. Did he think he could tuck and roll like they teach in parachute school? No such luck, the concrete was unforgiving. He heard the leg pop. He looked at the right leg and knew it was broken—those Cubistic angles, something drawn by Picasso—thought, “Shit, oh dear, I need help.” Yelled a few times from the mud puddle he was lying in, and the lady of the house came to the door. Told her he needed an ambulance. She called, and it came, but he could see it moving around the various lanes on the property trying to find the right address. He sent the lady's son to point them in the right direction. The ambulance took him to a small, local hospital, and he had luck getting the good orthopedic surgeon on call, Dr. Campbell, who put the pins and plate in his right leg. Left heel fracture, nothing to do there but let it knit together.

No casts. An ankle support on the right leg and an Ace bandage on the left. Three days in hospital and then home, crawling to the toilet. Painful, but soon he could stand and take small steps with his right foot, which helped him get in and out of my wheel chair. Crutches in the second week, after he had begun to use the right leg with the pins and plates to carry his weight. The heel fracture prohibited him from standing long on it. Takes a while for a fractured heel to heal. No fancy dancing, but he knew he would tangle again, if not tango. The doctor said he would be fine with ‘pin and plate fixation’ and recommended early movement. He asked for a set of X-rays, so he would not be stopped at security points in the airport.

Jampa has a scar on the right side of his lower abdomen after a hernia operation. The hernia appeared after a poetry reading where he displayed his collection of chapbooks. He refused help lifting the trunk that contained his books, and he carried it to his car. The bulge from his intestine appeared, and he had it diagnosed, but before he could have an operation, he attended a retreat at Tara Mandala. Some of the Yeshe Lama practices are very physical, and when he returned to his doctor, the bulge had grown, but the operation was successful. Again, his ninety-year-old mother set the dayroom up with a hospital bed and cared for him, while he recouped.

It is said you cannot complete the full transference of the body into light—the Rainbow Body—if you have tattoos or scars, so Jampa’s carcass will remain earthbound for this incarnation.

Scars can be tender, itchy and displeasing. Scars can be beautiful and intriguing. A scar can be a map, a mark of bravery or a sign of stupidity, a reminder of how precious life is and how cruel. A scar can be an ornament or a form of disfigurement. Some scars show, and some scars are deep in the psyche. Jampa says, “I look at my scars, astonished that I miraculously heal. The wounds vanish, and pale marks in the meat are all that remain.”