Scars
by Sarah Beth Martin

Ben could feel them staring at him, always. Even those people who saw him every day stared, and each time they did, he wondered if they knew that these were just scars on his face, that he was not born this way.

His scars were not fresh but fifteen years old now, from a tumble into rocks when he was three and his skin was still growing—soft, fresh, and unfinished. Even the deepest slices had grown over so that the gouges and grooves blended, almost melted into his skin, like evaporated streams or fine-sanded hollows in wood. Still, people noticed, and they stared until he was forced to look back, making them whisk their eyes away.

But today would be different; he had a new customer. Blind, his boss had told him, so for the first time, he would not have to be aware of his face.

He was always aware of his face, especially with cold wind on it, like now—ripening the skin, reddening the grooves and hollows. He’d flip over the collar of his corduroy coat, though, to protect his cheeks as he carried hot meals from his van to the front doors of the elderly.

Ben stepped onto the cement landing, scattered with acorns, peach-colored pine needles, and dry oak leaves. Beside the railing sat green and yellow gourds, knobby and twisted, oddly glistening in a thick layer of shellac. He balanced the tray on his left palm, fumbling his free hand through the full rhododendron that grew over the aluminum doorframe, until his fingers touched chipped paint and worn wood, then the doorbell. Anxiously he pressed it, staring beyond the storm glass to the heavy red door.

A muffled, high-pitched voice called out, “Who’s there?”

“Food service.”

“May I ask your name?” the woman's voice was warbly, almost gurgling.

“Ben. Ben Moran.”

The front door opened, and pale spotted hands emerged from the dark beyond, then a face, tight-skinned and rosy, with deep pockets below the cheeks. The woman was very old, perhaps in her nineties. “I just wanted to be sure it was you,” she said, her miniature voice buried, bubbling in her throat. She pressed her palm to
the storm door and opened it, her waxy, folded skin like rubber against the glass. “I’m Mrs. Carver. Come in.”

“Thank you.” Ben stepped into the apartment, and now he could see her—small and brittle-looking, leaning on a white-and-red cane. Her eyes were grayish and milky, gazing unfocused into air space in front of him. He wondered if she had always been blind or if she had once seen light and dark, her vision diminishing over time. Or did it happen suddenly—maybe some virus or age-induced condition, or an accident like his own?

“They told me that George isn't coming anymore,” she said.

“That's right,” Ben replied. “I’ll be bringing your meals now. Nice to meet you.” He started to hold out his hand, thinking of shaking hers, but withdrew it. Mrs. Carver smiled, exposing teeth of glossy ivory and blue. Ben smiled back—such an automatic gesture, but a strange thing to do when no one can see it. It felt embarrassing, as though someone watching might ask why he would do that. As if released by gravity, his smile quickly dropped, and when he tried to pull it back, it felt taut, unnatural. How awful, he realized, that although he managed to smile for others, even those who gawked at him, he could not do the same for a woman who was blind.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Mrs. Carver said, lifting her hand toward his. Her sinewy, freckled fingers rested on his thumb. Her hand was cold, all thin skin over bones, like a chicken. He gazed at her face, then her neck, where a large vein trailed beneath the daisy-print dress that billowed nearly to her feet, and a similar vein emerged at the shinbone, spidering out to her ankle. It felt odd to look at someone so closely, odd to inspect without being inspected.

“Where should I leave your food?” Ben asked. The tray felt heavy on his arm.

“Oh yes,” she said. “You may put it on the counter.” She pointed her cane at the counter that divided the kitchen and living room—the same layout as all other units at Northern Pines. Only Mrs. Carver's apartment had better décor: accessories lined the countertop, such as marble-and-copper canisters and glass jars filled with colorful pastas. The living room was all color and decoration: paisley and velvets, lace doilies under mahogany lamps with stained-glass shades. Lights—what for? he wondered. Visitors, of course.

Mrs. Carver stood close by as he set down the tray, and he could smell her powdered skin, like perfume, and baby-odor hair. She lifted her hand, and it hovered over the covered dinner, caressing hot air and steam, then moved to the lid and lifted it off.

“I smell chicken,” she said.
“With gravy,” Ben added, “and mashed potatoes and peas.”

“Delicious.” She smiled, her teeth gleaming like mother-of-pearl in the bright overhead light. “I’ll let it cool.” She turned to the living room and scuffed across the beige plush carpet, pointing her cane in front of her like a wise finger. She moved safely around the marble-top coffee table and onto the eggplant-shaped sofa. “Come here,” she said.

This was when Ben usually left his customers’ homes, but he obeyed, moving a few feet forward into the living room. Over the sofa hung a large, gold-framed painting: an Impressionist landscape of golden wheat, blue sky, and a strange, green-tinged sun. Maybe the painting is here for guests, he thought, like the pastas and Tiffany lamps. Or perhaps she once had seen this painting.

Ben loved the painting; it was color and light in meticulous placement, without emphasis on details or realism. He scrunched his eyes to blur the art, making it look more realistic, then relaxed them again to see just globs of paint, swirls of gold and blue. If only faces were perceived like this, he thought, as complete works, without features being scrutinized at close range.

Perhaps his own face would not seem so odd if it were not pulled apart like a puzzle, then dissected piece by piece.

He took a deep breath. “I love your painting,” he said.

“Thank you. My grandson painted it.”

“It’s very—,” Ben began but stopped. Vibrant, radiant, he wanted to say.

“It’s all right,” she said, her voice soft, tremoring slightly. “It’s all right to say what it looks like.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” She seemed to be looking at him, her glassy eyes eerily meeting his own. “Ben,” she added in her delicate, quavering voice, “what do you look like?”

He had never expected such a question, not today. And what could he say about scars that she would understand? Scars, he thought. Grooves, perhaps, like the ones on the gourds outside.

She was waiting.
“I... I’m tall,” he finally sputtered. This she knew, and would not lead to questions, awkwardness. “Six foot one. On the thin side.”

“What color hair?”

He hesitated. Color? “Blond,” he blurted out. “Do you know blond, Mrs. Carver?” A stupid question, he thought, as the lines between her straggly brows deepened. Maybe he had put her in the kind of humiliated, vulnerable position he would be in if someone had asked him about his scars.

“Yes,” she said, her features softening again. “I know blond.” She turned to the window and leaned forward, slowly—deliberately, it seemed, until a large spot of sunlight appeared on her face. “Blond is warm,” she said, “like the sun.” She closed her eyes—tightly, the way Ben did when bright light was too much for him—

but while her blind eyes stayed shut, the whole of her face seemed open, her skin and bones naked, receptive to the light. He imagined her sense, heightened: ears like microphones, nose like a dog’s, the crisp taste of fall on the edge of her tongue. And the sun—this sun coming through the glass, warm and good on her face. Perhaps she had always been blind, and this was the only way she knew blond; or maybe she was remembering, her vision lost but the snapshot still in her head.

A faint chime sounded from behind, and Ben thought of his other customers. He had lost track of time, forgotten about his responsibilities. “I have to go,” he said. “Should I bring your dinner into the living room?”

“Oh no, I’ll get it in a bit.” Mrs. Carver’s eyes were still shut, her face toward the window. Patches of shadows from a swaying branch danced across her yellow skin.

“Ben,” she said, “may I ask you to do something for me?”

“Sure,” he replied.

“Come over here.” Her tiny hands lifted, then floated in the air, waiting for him. Ben breathed deeply as he moved toward her, wondering if she would touch his face, the way the blind sometimes do in movies. She would discover the uneven terrain; then he would feel the way he always did. “May I have your hands?” she asked. He reached out, and she took them, her velvet fingers pressing and kneading his own like clay. Her milky eyes seemed to gaze at him again.

“Are you an artist?” she asked.

“I like art. I painted as a child ... but no, I’m not.”
“No?”

“No.”

Her expression fell. “Maybe you were supposed to be.” A chill rushed through him like a cold rain, past his lungs and heart, and into the storm of his stomach, his vital organs; He felt a large, empty space—a heaviness in his body, the way his face had felt all these years, dragging and pulling him down, as if his soul were sleeping or dead. Naked, as if one of his senses were missing.

“Maybe,” he said, trying to think back to his childhood, then to his later years, after he had grown afraid. Could she be right? Was there something inside him he had never allowed to develop? “Maybe I was.” He loosened his hands from hers. “I have to go,” he said. But he didn’t want to go, to leave the one person who was not pushing him away, who didn’t know about his scars or insecurity. The person with whom he could be himself. “I’m sorry,” he added, letting go.

He backed away and caught sight of a bright blur of orange in the corner. A pumpkin propped on a high wooden stool, nestled in a bed of oak leaves. It was short and wide and lopsided, with a deep horizontal groove across the vertical ones—the skin unbroken yet deformed, perhaps the result of growing around a rock, twig, or vine. The deformity was smooth, too perfect to have occurred recently; it must have happened early on, and there had been time for it to heal, to mature. Or maybe it was stepped on but survived.

“Your pumpkin—,” Ben said, “I like your pumpkin.” There were no mirrors in Mrs. Carver’s living room to remind him of his face, but there was a pumpkin. He imagined her picking it out—her thin, feeble fingers feeling their way around the pile at the farm stand or supermarket, deciding on this particular one.

“Thank you,” she said.

He moved close to her again. “You asked me,” he said, the words coming out of his mouth but not feeling like his own, “what I look like.” He knelt in front of her, and she pressed her tiny hands to his face. She spread her cold, thin fingers on the sides of his head, her thumbs moving to his temples, then his cheekbones. She glided carefully over his nostrils, eyes, and skin that stretched from cheek to jaw. Her touch felt like paint caressing a canvas, filling the grooves, the deep tracks. Her eyes squinted, then widened.

“What happened to you?” she asked, without hesitation, without any fear, it seemed.
“I took a bad fall,” he said, “when I was young.” Suddenly his shoulders felt lighter, the air around him clearer, more open. “I was so young I don’t even remember it.”

“It must have been terrible.”

“As I said, I can’t remember.”

“I mean,” she replied, “Growing up that way.”

“I’ve had these scars ... almost forever. I don’t know what it’s like not to have them,” he said.

“That doesn’t mean anything.” Her liquid eyes and soft voice were somehow gentle, welcoming. She lifted her hands from his face. “You’d better get going. We can talk again another time.”

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He turned and headed for the door, thinking that maybe tomorrow he would ask her about being blind, and the next day he might ask how well she knew the painting on her wall. Perhaps she even wanted him to ask.

“Thank you, Ben,” she said to him. He looked back, saw her smiling.

“Thank you, Mrs. Carver. Good-bye.” He heard her soft good-bye just after stepping outside and closing the door behind him, her voice like that of an angel—fluid yet wavering, almost melodious. He stood on the cement slab, among the acorns and gourds and leaves, then closed his eyes—he smelled the burnt, dried grass of the lawn and the bark of the trees, felt the crunch of leaves beneath his shoes; he tasted autumn. And there was wind—the wail against vinyl siding, the rustle of dry rhododendrons; even with his eyes closed, he knew it was blowing from the west because his hair was sweeping to the left, in front of his ear like a sideburn, perhaps even covering a scar or two.

Ben flipped down the collar of his corduroy coat and turned to the oncoming breeze, his hair parting and flying away from his face. The air was invigorating, alive, and he felt himself smile as he stepped into the elements with his eyes still closed—the sun bright, the cold wind like sandpaper on his skin.