

## Scar

Fall.

Mrs. Ianucci, the babysitter, had a scar that, as I remember it, resembled in shape and dimension the continent of South America. She had stepped into her backyard, no doubt hearing dogs bark, to see what was going on, and had thought in her haste only to button the top button of her sleeveless blouse, and there it was, emblazoned like a tattoo atop her protruding hard stomach, the purple scar. Behind her the canopy of a weeping willow fell like a curtain. It was morning. In the bright light she looked as if she were on a stage, alone and there for me to see.

“None of the chickens are out, are they?” she asked, un-self-consciously scratching the side of her face.

Where my parents found Mrs. Ianucci I have no idea, perhaps through friends, since in those days friends often shared babysitters. We’d had a run of baby sitters: Mrs. Hycee, an elderly woman, permed white hair and cardigan sweater, who nursed a glass of beer while working her crossword puzzle on the kitchen table; Myra, divorced, pale and pock-marked, who sat in the same chair as Mrs. Hycee, head bent over an open real estate manual, preparing for her exam; and various teenage girls, too young or too plain to have dates, who started homework on the kitchen table but ended up in front of the T.V., eyes fixed on an episode of Gunsmoke or The Twilight Zone.

Mrs. Ianucci was my parents’ age, mid-thirties or so, a mother herself with two sons, both older than me. She was short, thick arms and legs. Her clothes, though clean, often looked mismatched, as if put together hastily without much thought. There was nothing unusual or remarkable about her general appearance. Though when she wore lipstick, which wasn’t all the time, the lipstick was so bright and thick on her lips that as a nine year old I couldn’t help staring. Then I saw her eyes, watery blue orbs, wide and disturbed. I felt self-conscious, quietly looked away, not so much because I was caught

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staring, but because Mrs. Ianucci's eyes betrayed something unsettling, frightening even, about Mrs. Ianucci and I had seen as much.

She came into our house, leather purse over her shoulder, and my parents, hurrying out the door, probably never noticed her eyes. Neither did my sister and brothers, She sat alone with me at the kitchen table, telling stories about unusual people she knew. Sometimes she did card tricks, pulling a deck from her purse then shuffling the cards this way and that between her chunky fingers. But mostly she talked: about someone named Alice, who had different colored eyes and, at forty, was training to be a sword swallower for the circus; someone else named Gloria, who had hair to her knees and, depressed, hadn't come out of her house for ten years; someone named Salvatore, an old Italian, a neighbor of hers, who lived in a shack with no electricity or running water. I was rapt with her stories. Our time together was exciting, but also it felt clandestine, as if my being alone with Mrs. Ianucci and listening to her stories was something illicit. Which was probably why I never mentioned a word about it to my parents.

When my sister complained that Mrs. Ianucci only paid attention to me, I worried she might reveal to my parents my secret. "Yeah," I said, "and if it wasn't for me and Mrs. Ianucci talking, you wouldn't get to stay up so late."

Shortly before the last time Mrs. Ianucci babysat us, she pulled from her leather purse a set of tarot cards. Earlier, while she stood behind my mother, fastening a string of pearls at the back of my mother's neck-- my father, waiting for my mother in the car, had honked half a dozen times already --, I overheard Mrs. Ianucci say, "Mary, I learned how to read cards and it really works. Maybe the cards can help you." My mother looked at me and rolled her eyes.

Mrs. Ianucci laid out the cards and read her friends' fortunes: Alice would soon face misfortune, but in the end be all the wiser for it; Gloria would soon get past her slump; and Salvatore, the old Italian, he was going to come into a fortune, though in Mrs. Ianucci's estimation, independent of anything discerned from the cards, he wouldn't change his living conditions one iota.

"What about me?" I asked.

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Mrs. Ianucci didn't lay out the cards for me. I realized then, with my question still floating somewhere between us, that not only had I never asked her for anything, but, for as long as we'd been having these private meetings, several months, nearly as long as she'd been babysitting us, I hadn't uttered hardly a word at the table. I was confused and disappointed. Moreso, when she said, "You talk too much."

Now, nearly fifty years later, I find myself seated on a cement bench outside the Coddington shopping mall, facing northwest toward Mrs. Ianucci's house. So much has changed. For instance, here, where the mall and its crowded parking lots sit, I remember prune orchards, rows and rows of trees, and about a mile northwest, where there are strip malls and industrial buildings, warehouses and such, I remember open fields and farm houses, Mrs. Ianucci's small house among them.

It is seven o'clock in the evening, late September, the autumn light is rich, golden and ocher. My cousin, Linda, seated with me on the bench, pulls the red plastic bag containing the C.D.s I bought her onto her lap.

"Those prunes," she says, "picking those god-damned prunes. Do you remember how the yellow jackets would get on them?"

Linda likes to reminisce. We've been sitting on the bench ten minutes and she has recalled when, as teenagers, we coerced a homeless man to buy beer for us, the boy's dean in junior high whom she described as "porky-faced," the fate of two cousins, and now prune-picking. She'd started with the memories at dinner, while we were in line at a Chinese smorgasbord, and, forty-five minutes later in the music store, she was still going.

Three months ago, after thirty years away, I moved home to Santa Rosa. If it wasn't for the fact that Linda was mostly calling up a past I remembered, you'd have thought she was already trying to catch me up on everything I had missed. The last time I'd seen her was after my mother died. I'd gone to the funeral home before the rosary to sit with the coffin and collect my thoughts. Thinking I had been alone, I was surprised when I turned and found Linda, several pews behind me, kneeling, head bowed.

She keeps on about the prunes; how, if she wanted new school clothes in the fall she had to pick prunes, and the only good thing about picking prunes was that schools didn't open until after the harvest. She had mentioned my mother earlier -- that my

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mother worked in the mall at J.C. Penny's -- and maybe that is why I'm thinking of Mrs. Ianucci now. Or is it because I'm facing in the direction of where Mrs. Ianucci once lived? Yet, it's not memories of my mother behind the men's furnishings counter at J.C. Penny's that comes to mind, or Mrs. Ianucci's house or her babysitting, or even her storytelling, but her scar. It's there, grotesque, plain to see in that morning light, whenever I think of Mrs. Ianucci.

If my mother never said where she found Mrs. Ianucci, then neither did she say at the time why she disappeared. We hadn't seen Mrs. Ianucci for about six months. Then my parents divorced. Looking back, it was as if the house was suddenly tilted on end and my frantic mother was running helter-skelter attempting to keep everything from sliding away. She couldn't hold on to my pets: two jersey heifers and a flock of bantam chickens. The heifers went to a dairy. The chickens went to Mrs. Ianucci, I suppose because my mother could think of no one else to keep them, and my mother was never particularly enthused about driving me to and from Mrs. Ianucci's house to visit the chickens, but no doubt she couldn't think either of another way to compensate me for the loss. There were pairs of Mille Fluers, speckled like pheasants, and Cochins with feathered legs and feet.

Roaming dogs had recently killed a hen, and Mrs. Ianucci had been keeping all the chickens locked up. I simply told her none of the chickens was out, half-expecting her to go back inside. But she didn't move. I'm certain she saw me staring. After a moment, she said something about a horse her youngest son bought. I kept waiting for her to button her blouse, but she never did, not even when she turned finally and went back into the house.

"What about Mrs. Ianucci?" I say to Linda.

"Remember when we snuck up on Mrs. Ianucci and that old wino? She rejoins, and I see in the blink of an eye what she tells next.

That old wino was Salvatore, the Italian, Mrs. Ianucci's neighbor, who lived in a shack with no electricity or running water.

Linda, with her mother and sisters, had moved from town to a house on Hardies Lane, Mrs. Ianucci's street. The house was unpainted. Weeds grew up along the fence,

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tall as the roses. Like much of the property in the area, the house had been sold months before to developers. At this time, I was fifteen or thereabouts. I had not seen Mrs. Ianucci for four years at least. Four years is a long time in a kid's life: I'd learned to let go of my two heifers and the chickens -- I didn't have much choice, since my mother had taken a job at J.C. Penny's and had no time to drive me -- and, until Linda, giving me directions to where she moved, mentioned Hardies Lane, I hadn't thought of Mrs. Ianucci either.

"I knew this lady who lived up the street -- Mrs. Ianucci," I said.

Linda and I were seated on the couch. Linda's mother stood in the doorway between the front room and kitchen. Linda was short and dark, attractive beyond her years, jet black hair and eyes, an Indian for sure. Her mother, on the other hand, was light-skinned and tall with a mass of red hair that, until I had mentioned Mrs. Ianucci, she was busy plucking pink and purple foam curlers from. Now she stood looking at me.

"She's a crazy woman," she said. "How the hell do you know her?"

Linda's mother was defiant, certainly not one to mince words. Though just then, with her face lit by the evening sun pouring through a window, she looked weary. She dropped a curler into the glass bowl atop a stack of unpacked boxes.

"My mother used to know her," I said.

A self-conscious teenager, late to mature, unlike Linda, I didn't want to call up the fact that I had ever needed a babysitter. Or was it that, remembering Mrs. Ianucci's storytelling at my kitchen table, I accepted Linda's mother's assessment as true and didn't want to be associated with her?

An hour later, after a horn honked and Linda's mother disappeared, Linda told me what her mother meant by crazy. Mrs. Ianucci paraded up and down her driveway in a black bathing suit and high heels; occasional loud shrieks from her house woke neighbors in the middle of the night; and, according to some of those same neighbors, on weekends, when Mrs. Ianucci's husband worked the late shift at the shoe factory, she visited the old Italian, who, far from being poor, had wads of money hidden under his shack and paid Mrs. Ianucci for sex.

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“Maybe she visits him because she wants someone to speak Italian with,” I offered.

Linda laughed. She said that it was Mr. Ianucci who was Italian, that Mrs. Ianucci was neither Italian nor spoke Italian. I wondered how she knew this, when I, who actually knew Mrs. Ianucci, didn't. More importantly, I saw my cue.

“Let's go see...It's the weekend. Look at the clock.”

I was surprised Mrs. Ianucci was still around, much less in the same house. Again, four years is an eternity in a kid's life. Hadn't she faded away somewhere?

What happened to my chickens? Had Mrs. Ianucci gotten worse? -- If Linda's mother was correct, that Mrs. Ianucci was crazy, then was what I had experienced with her, all those bizarre stories, an early symptom of her madness? Had my parents seen as much and fired her -- perhaps the business with her tarot cards? Now I had an opportunity to catch a glimpse of her.

Linda was reluctant. Cast as babysitter with her mother's disappearance, she was responsible for her four younger sisters, plus her mother had asked her to finish unpacking boxes. Ultimately, I persuaded her, saying we would simply sneak a peak and come right back. She shot me a glance that suggested I was out of my mind.

There was an old man named Salvatore, or at least an old man, Italian or not, who lived two short fields from Mrs. Ianucci, for, once, while I was visiting my chickens, Mrs. Ianucci painted over her barbed wire fence to a shack, more like a squat barn, and I spied a skulking figure in overalls moving about the place. I looked for signs of electricity -- a T.V. antenna, wires extending from the telephone pole on the street -- and found none. Wasn't he old then? How old would he be now? Sex with Mrs. Ianucci? It seemed incredible to me, but I figured I might get to see Mrs. Ianucci nonetheless: Linda and I could steal into her yard and peer through her windows. Then, half-way out of Linda's yard, we were stopped suddenly. Mrs. Ianucci was passing on the street. It was dark, we couldn't see her well, only her white dress billowing in the breeze as she made her way away from us.

We waited some time on Linda's porch step. Of course Mrs. Ianucci could have been going anywhere, maybe just taking a walk. It was a balmy late summer night, after

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all. But I didn't suggest as much to Linda, lest she have more reason not to take the adventure. I said, "O.k., let's go," and Linda said dryly, "What, you think they're having sex by now?"

The thought of Mrs. Ianucci and an old man having sex wasn't appealing, certainly. I had thought of her scar, but I didn't expect to see it, not unless we discovered her naked, again not appealing. What was driving me? Seeing Mrs. Ianucci after all this time? Seeing her now a full-fledged crazy woman? Was it just the sheer excitement of possibly seeing something I wasn't supposed to, of getting away with something?

"What else are we going to do, sit in your house all night?" I answered Linda.

The shack was a square silhouette in the middle of an empty field. A dirt road led to it from the street. We crawled through a wire fence, then crouched as we scuttled across the field. There was nothing to hide behind, not until we came to a low-growing fig tree, but by then we were next to the shack. There was the sharp scent of ripe figs. Through the leafy foliage faint light shone from an open window.

"They'll hear us," Linda whispered.

Old leaves littered the ground. There didn't seem to be any other windows, not on this side of the shack, and it would have been stupid to risk passing an open door. What if the old man had a dog?

Not a sound came from the window. I poked Linda with my finger, urging her forward. She grabbed a hold of my finger and with it shoved my hand away. Alone, I edged forward then, gingerly stepping over the leaves toward the window. When I looked back, I couldn't see Linda. She was on the other side of the tree. I was below the window.

Peering over the ledge, I saw a stove pipe and pots hanging from big nails or bolts on the opposite wall. Raising up, my line of vision taking in more of the room, I saw the old man, grey-whiskered, wizened, in dirty overalls and a stained long-sleeved cotton shirt, then Mrs. Ianucci, below me, just the back of her head, the same unremarkable brown hair drooping in loose curls to her shoulders. One might have thought them an old farmer and his daughter or granddaughter, or maybe an old farmer and his young wife. There was a card table between them -- the room was sparse; besides the cast iron stove

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top below the stove pipe, I could see little else. A kerosene lamp burned atop an adjacent counter and some canned goods were stacked there. An empty plate and a bunched up napkin was on the table; perhaps he had just finished dinner. She was reading a movie magazine. At one point, he muttered something -- in Italian -- and I ducked down. But when I looked again, he was gazing blankly, and she was still reading her magazine.

When I heard Linda heading back across the field, I followed her.

What did I have to report? I saw the old man and I saw the back of Mrs. Ianucci's head. She was indeed there, but so what?

"Maybe she fixed him dinner -- maybe that's what she does going down there," Linda said, both of us seated again on her couch.

There had to be more. Thirty minutes later I went back alone. No way could I coerce Linda to go a second time, I didn't even try.

I was careful crossing the field and sidling past the fig tree, but I felt more reckless, exposed somehow. Mrs. Ianucci was talking-- the voice I remembered -- about someone-- her sister-in-law?-- borrowing something and not giving it back. I never heard what it was she lost, but she was peeved and her husband hadn't stuck up for her. She was still talking when I peeked over the window ledge, but she was busy packing her magazine into her purse on the table, and the old man, mouth agape, was in his chair dead asleep.

Figuring she was getting ready to leave, I tore away while I still had the chance, before she might come out and find me. Past the fig tree, I could still hear the sound of her voice.

I wanted to tell Linda something fantastic: Mrs. Ianucci fell into a trance and started speaking in tongues. Or something gross: they were having sex.

"I think she was talking to herself," I said, not able to come up with anything else.

The adventure, short of allowing me a peek at Mrs. Ianucci, and only the back of her head, provided no insights, no answers. I could not prove or disprove any of Linda's stories about her -- whether or not she was a crazy woman. If I wasn't disappointed then, I am now, as if Linda's mentioning the escapade should have been more than the mere memory of an uneventful childhood prank. Did I expect somehow to learn



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something new about Mrs. Ianucci? Did I expect Linda to explain the scar? I never told her, or anyone, about the scar. Perhaps because I felt embarrassed for having seen it, for having looked in the first place, and for continuing to look, as if Mrs. Ianucci, a woman my mother's age, was naked and I was intrigued with what I was seeing. Still, I want to ask Linda something about that night-- I don't know what-- but of course she's onto something else, a story about an argument one of her sisters had at an Indian Health Clinic picnic over how to cook hamburgers.

Ever since I moved back to Santa Rosa, I've been trying to find myself in the place. I'm often lost: What was where the Post Office is? Wasn't there a hill where Yardbirds sits? My mother, who could help me, is gone. It's a wonder I didn't call and ask Linda to dinner sooner. She never left this town. Over the years I checked in with her whenever I visited, and our time together was the same, the reminiscences and current stories. I could connect past to present. In the music store I bought her two of our favorite C.D.s: Otis Redding's Greatest Hits with "Dock of a Bay" and Aretha Franklin's Gold with "Respect." But now she is getting on my nerves. Granted, she usually does most of the talking, but she's incessant, going a mile a minute, like I've never seen her, all of it feeling as meaningless as the memory of an uneventful childhood prank.

I met Linda in junior high, eighth grade. I had a crush on her. She accommodated me for awhile, which surprised me since, gangly and immature, I considered myself out of her league. No doubt she understood all along that I was better suited for a friend and not a boyfriend. An older guy, truly tough with bulging biceps and a gold cross chain, whisked her away soon enough. He was her cousin, too. In my defense, I didn't know Linda and I were related. I didn't even know I was Indian. I was adopted. My birth mother was white and, rumor had it, my birth father was Mexican. In the fifties, when I was born, there was much confusion amongst county lawyers and social workers over California Indian identity. An individual with brown skin was often assumed to be Mexican, particularly if he or she had a Spanish surname, as in the case with my father, Emilio Hilario. Linda and I are great-great grandchildren of Tom Smilth, the renown last Coast Miwok medicine man.

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I was living in Menlo Park, in grad school at Stanford, when I learned about my father. When I told Linda the news, she didn't seem surprised or excited. Was it because she'd already had a cousin boyfriend? Or was it that, because Tom Smith had many, many children, there was always a chance any two Indians from Sonoma County might be related? Maybe she didn't believe me: with fair skin, I look white. In any event, she started talking soon about something else.

She lives with one of her sisters in a new apartment building west of town. She was married once, for a short while after high school. She worked with her mother those days in the fisheries. She took some business classes and got a job at P.G. and E., in customer services I think, and after that was a receptionist for a community health program. Awhile ago, she was in a car accident, serious; and though she seems to have recovered, she hasn't returned to work full-time. She baby sits her sister's grandson a few hours after school, and sometimes on the weekends care takes an elderly man. Her room in the apartment is small, neat as a pin. She's proud of the ingenious manner she has made shelves with wood planks and cinder blocks, sturdy enough to hold a new C.D. player and speakers on the top shelf. "People think I'm crazy keeping all this stuff, but look," she said, pointing to several plastic crates stacked against a wall. C.D.s and old record albums, magazines, school yearbooks, family mementos and scrapbooks-- the crates were crammed full, yet everything was labeled, and she took pains, lifting heavy crates, to read every file, even as I stood, keys in hand, waiting to go to dinner. Was that when her incessant talking began? It occurs to me that she is drunk, or high on something.

There is so much we could be talking about. Our shared history, for instance. I see our great-great grandfather, Tom Smith, on a wagon, leather reins in his hands, following a dirt road across this valley. From where he lived, in Bodega Bay, it took sometimes half a day to get to Santa Rosa by wagon. But he had songs, they say hummingbird songs, and he could get here in the blink of an eye. Once, at the edge of town, there was a woman suffocating, asthma or maybe consumption, and he pulled a rabbit out of her chest. Another time, he made a small incision on the back of a man's head, then tossed the piece of sharp quartz he used into Santa Rosa Creek.

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It is fall. Mabel McKay, late Pomo basket weaver and medicine woman, used to say: "It is a prayerful time. Pay attention because you are taking from the earth what you will need to live on during the winter. Be prayful, be watchful, or you won't have enough." I imagine my ancestors hereabouts in this autumn twilight. Men and women sort through a cache of acorns spilled on the ground. Their faces and the rich designs in the upturned burden baskets flicker in the firelight. Maybe they think of ancient time stories, Coyote stories. They won't tell them when it's too dark to work any longer, it is forbidden until after the first frost, but already they anticipate the long nights ahead.

Linda talks about hamburgers-- hamburgers; and how the nephew she baby sits is a brat, probably has A.D.D.; how her sister, the grandmother of the brat, is diabetic and eats everything she shouldn't. And did I know that food additives make people crazy, that canned tuna is full of Mercury, and that eventually we're all going to get done in by global warming? Billy, a kid we knew in junior high, has hepatitis C, and Angie Williams, his girlfriend then, still lives with her mother...

She's aged since the last time I saw her. It's strange to think both of us are older now than her mother was that night we spied on Mrs. Ianucci. Her hair is dyed red, which made me think of her mother when I first saw her. She keeps herself up well. It wasn't her hair or the few lines on her face that made me think she looked older, but that quality you sometimes see in people who were heavier earlier in their lives, not shrunken or withered, just smaller. She never has been much interested in a history beyond her lived experience. She is a Catholic and is ambivalent at best about Indian traditions. I don't expect profound conversations about Tom Smith, or whatever else Indian. It's not that she's not talking about Tom Smith that really bothers me now, but her aimless babbling. It's grating. I wish I could take her home, but she won't stop talking.

The color of the night deepens and I feel more anxious. My mind wanders again. I remember picking prunes, and Linda and her sisters joking about the old Indian women who sometimes packed prunes in burden baskets -- "Can tell they're Indians!" -- and I see the old women, traditional long dresses, and on their backs burden baskets, impossibly heavy with purple fruit.

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Then I catch the words, Linda saying, “I knew my mother was dead, but I put it on her just the way she did, the lipstick, the eye shadow, last the hair.”

I am struck. I know the story, how the undertaker, for whatever reasons, asked Linda to make up her mother’s face before the funeral. Linda told me about this years before; in fact, she’s told me about it a couple of times, repeating herself, so it’s not as if the image it invokes is anything new. But now I can’t get the picture out of my mind: Linda bent over her mother’s corpse, cylinder of lipstick between her fingers, etching bright gloss onto her mother’s lips, carefully, as if her mother might rise up and correct her.

She’s quiet now. Was she talking for my benefit? Was she talking over her own pain? She’s not at all drunk or high. She’s landed on a memory too painful to continue talking, she’s stumbled and so have I, but I understand this only after I understand what is happening. Everything has come together at once. My mother. The town. Linda and I sitting on a bench outside the mall. Tom Smith. Of course, Mrs. Ianucci. The image tells me everything that matters now. What’s Linda been doing?-- What’s this storytelling, now or in the depths of winter, incessant or not, but a covering of the cold and dark with a semblance of life?

I can understand Mrs. Ianucci, or begin to. And my obsession with her scar. I don’t know how she got the scar. An operation? An accident? I don’t know either if she is still alive-- I think the last time I saw her was the night I spied on her. Certainly she doesn’t live on Hardies Lane anymore. But at least I know a story I can tell. About a boy who caught sight of misfortune, a tear in the fabric of life, represented by an ugly scar over a woman’s bare stomach. In the same vein, I’d like to imagine that Mrs. Ianucci saw in her tarot cards that I would be a writer and, at that point, by telling me that I talked too much, she was advising me to watch the world carefully, to listen. But that is another story.

I’m ashamed of my impatience. But my feet are on the ground. This is fall. Each story that rises from the landscape takes on its purple hue, as far as I can see; the sky, like an upturned basket, reaches to the horizons, at this moment I could turn it upright and carry it off.