

No one
belongs
here more
than you.
Stories by
Miranda
July

Birthmark

On a scale of one to ten, with ten being childbirth, this will be a three.

A three? Really?

Yes. That's what they say.

What other things are a three?

Well, five is supposed to be having your jaw reset.

So it's not as bad as that.

No.

What's two?

Having your foot run over by a car.

Wow, so it's worse than that?

But it's over quickly.

Okay, well, I'm ready. No—wait; let me adjust my sweater.

Okay, I'm ready.

All right, then.

Here goes a three.

The laser, which had been described as pure white light, was more like a fist slammed against a countertop, and her body was a cup on the counter, jumping with each slam. It turned out three was just a number. It didn't describe the pain any more than money describes the thing it buys. Two thousand dollars for a port-wine stain removed. A kind of birthmark that seems messy and accidental, as if this red area covering one whole cheek were the careless result of too much fun. She spoke to her body like an animal at the vet, Shhh, it's okay, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry we have to do this to you. This is not unusual; most people feel that their bodies are innocent of their crimes, like animals or plants. Not that this was a crime. She had waited patiently from the time she was fourteen for aesthetic surgery to get cheap, like computers. Nineteen ninety-eight was the year lasers came to the people as good bread, eat and be full, be finally perfect. Oh yes, perfect. She didn't think she would have bothered if she hadn't been what people call "very beautiful except for." This is a special group of citizens living under special laws. Nobody knows what to do with them. We mostly want to stare at them like the optical illusion of a vase made out of the silhouette of two peo-

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ple kissing. Now it is a vase . . . now it could only be two people kissing . . . oh, but it is so completely a vase. It is both! Can the world sustain such a contradiction? And this was even better, because as the illusion of prettiness and horribleness flipped back and forth, we flipped with it. We were uglier than her, then suddenly we were lucky not to be her, but then again, at this angle she was too lovely to bear. She was both, we were both, and the world continued to spin.

Now began the part of her life where she was just very beautiful, except for nothing. Only winners will know what this feels like. Have you ever wanted something very badly and then gotten it? Then you know that winning is many things, but it is never the thing you thought it would be. Poor people who win the lottery do not become rich people. They become poor people who won the lottery. She was a very beautiful person who was missing something very ugly. Her winnings were the absence of something, and this quality hung around her. There was so much potential in the imagined removal of the birthmark; any fool on the bus could play the game of guessing how perfect she would look without it. Now there was not this game to play, there was just a spent feeling. And she was no idiot, she could sense it. In the first few months after the surgery, she received many compliments, but they were always coupled with a kind of disorientation.

Now you can wear your hair up and show off your face more.

Yeah, I'm going to try it that way.

Miranda July

Wait, say that again.

"I'm going to try it that way." What?

Your little accent is gone.

What accent?

You know, the little Norwegian thing.

Norwegian?

Isn't your mom Norwegian?

She's from Denver.

But you have that little bit of an accent, that little . . . way of saying things.

I do?

Well, not anymore, it's gone now.

And she felt a real sense of loss. Even though she knew she had never had an accent. It was the birthmark, which in its density had lent color even to her voice. She didn't miss the birthmark, but she missed her Norwegian heritage, like learning of new relatives, only to discover they have just died.

All in all, though, this was minor, less disruptive than insomnia (but more severe than *déjà vu*). Over time she knew more and more people who had never seen her with the birthmark. These people didn't feel any haunting absence, why should they? Her husband was one of these people. You could tell by looking at him. Not that he wouldn't have married a woman with a port-wine stain. But he probably wouldn't have. Most people don't and are none the worse for it. Of course, sometimes it would happen that she would see

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a couple and one of them would have a port-wine stain and the other would clearly be in love with this stained person and she would hate her husband a little. And he could feel it.

Are you being weird?

No.

You are.

Actually, I'm not. I'm just eating my salad.

I can see them, too, you know. I saw them come in.

Hers is worse than mine was. Mine didn't go down on my neck like that.

Do you want to try this soup?

I bet he's an environmentalist. Doesn't he look like one?

Maybe you should go sit with them.

Maybe I will.

I don't see you moving.

Did you just finish the soup? I thought we were splitting.

I offered it to you.

Well, you can't have any of this salad, then.

It was a small thing, but it was a thing, and things have a way of either dying or growing, and it wasn't dying. Years went by. This thing grew, like a child, microscopically, every day. And since they were a team, and all teams want to win, they continuously adjusted their vision to keep its growth invisible. They wordlessly excused each other for not loving each other as much as they had planned to. There were empty rooms in the house where they had meant to put their love, and they worked together to fill these rooms with midcentury mod-

ern furniture. Herman Miller, George Nelson, Charles and Ray Eames. They were never alone; it became crowded. The next sudden move would have to be through the wall. What happened was this. She was trying to get the lid off a new jar of jam, and she was banging it on the counter. This is a well-known tip, a kitchen trick, a bang to loosen the lid. It's not witchery or black magic, it's simply a way to release the pressure under the lid. She banged it too hard, and the jar broke. She screamed. Her husband came running when he heard the sound. There was red everywhere, and in that instant he saw blood. Hallucinatory clarity: you are certain of what you see. But in the next moment, your fear relinquishes control: it was jam. Everywhere. She was laughing, picking shards of glass out of the strawberry mash. She was laughing at the mess, and her face was down, looking at the floor, and her hair was around her face like a curtain, and then she looked up at him and said, Can you bring the trash can over here?

And it happened again. For a moment he thought he saw a port-wine stain on her cheek. It was fiercely red and bigger than he had ever imagined. It was bloodier than even blood, like sick blood, animal blood, the blood racist people think beats inside people of other races: blood that shouldn't touch my own. But the next moment it was just jam, and he laughed and rubbed the kitchen towel on her cheek. Her clean cheek. Her port-wine stain.

Honey.

Can you get the trash can?

Honey.

What?

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Go look in the mirror.

What?

Go look in the mirror.

Stop talking like that. Why are you talking like that?
What?

He was looking at her cheek. She instinctively put her hand on the mark and ran to the bathroom.

She was in there for a long time. Maybe thirty minutes. You've never had thirty minutes like these. She stared at the port-wine stain and she breathed in and she breathed out. It was like being twenty-three again, but she was thirty-eight now. Fifteen years without it, and now here it was. In the same exact place. She rubbed her finger around its edges. It came as high as her right eye, over to the edge of her right nostril, across her whole cheek to the ear, ending at her jawbone. In purplish-red. She wasn't thinking anything, she wasn't afraid or disappointed or worried. She was looking at the stain the way one would look at oneself fifteen years after one's own death. Oh, you again. Now it was obvious it had always been there; she had startled it back into sight. She looked into its redness and breathed in and breathed out and found herself in a kind of trance. She thought: I am in a kind of trance. She was just blowing around. It lasted about twenty-five minutes, a very, very long time to be just blowing around. Mostly, you waft for a second or two, a half second, maybe. And then you spend the rest of your life trying to describe it, to regain the perspective. You say, It was like I was just blowing around, and you wave your arms in the air. But there were no arms like that, and you know it. She came out of the trance like a plane

taking off. Instead of being inside the stain, she was now looking down on it from above. Like a lake, it grew smaller and smaller until it was only a tiny region in a larger mass. One that this pilot favored, hovered over, but would not touch down on again. She pulled some toilet paper off the roll and blew her nose.

He found himself kneeling. He was waiting for her on his knees. He was worried she would not let him love her with the stain. He had already decided long ago, twenty or thirty minutes ago, that the stain was fine. He had only seen it for a moment, but he was already used to it. It was good. It somehow allowed them to have more. They could have a child now, he thought. There was a loose feeling in the air. The jam was still on the floor, and that was okay. He would just kneel here and wait for her to come out and hope he would be able to tell her about the looseness in a loose way. He wanted to keep the feeling. He hoped she wasn't removing it somehow, the stain. She should keep it, and they should have a kid. He could hear her blowing her nose; now she was opening the door. He would stay on his knees, just like this. She would see him this way and understand.