

44 Tiny Lessons

Category: Scars

written by Andrea Gordon | April 17, 2024

Ironically, I was one of the EMTs on call that night at college. It had been a frustrating day, and now I had work due but couldn't focus on it. My on-again, off-again boyfriend had decided that he would rather date Sylvia, who was thinner and prettier than me. Sad and angry, I decided to go get a snack from the vending machine downstairs.

The cafeteria had a door with a push bar that I sometimes kicked open when my hands were full. Swishing angrily down the dorm hall in my peasant skirt, I kicked that door open. Which had no push bar. It was a glass door.

My foot went through the door, and I had a moment of frozen clarity, thinking "I have to lift it before pulling it back through, or it will cut me even more." But then it seems I lost about half a minute. I am told I sat down and looked dazed, then got up slowly. What I recall is asking one of the people who had popped out of their doors for a chair and then turning off my beeper. (Yes, it was that long ago.) I sat on the chair pulling glass out of my leg until the other EMTs came.

My friend Addison said he would go with me to the hospital. I held it together until we got to the ER, and then I started crying. Addison and the PA who stitched me up were wonderful, acknowledging my pain and making jokes so I couldn't help but laugh, even while feeling stupid for doing this.

The most painful part, as anyone who has had stitches knows, was being numbed up. It took two bottles of lidocaine. Lying on my stomach, I was damned if I was going to yell. When he was done injecting, we realized I had bitten a hole in the cloth pillowcase. One more thing to add to the bill, we joked.

Forty-four stitches later, I was sent back to campus on crutches. The wound healed but left an angry red track, wider at the top where the muscles pulled. There is a small, inconspicuous scar in the skin precisely over my Achilles tendon, reminding me how lucky I had been that one moment of anger had not caused permanent harm. I was already self-conscious about my legs, and afterwards it felt like people were staring. Friends suggested I make up a good story and say it was a shark bite or fencing injury, which all seemed better than admitting I was angry and made a stupid mistake.

But that story has since served me. I have told patients that I really know how much lidocaine can hurt. I have shared with teens that I did thoughtless things that caused damage. And, most importantly, I have forgiven myself.

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