

SCAR SONGS:

Stories

W. Royce Adams

Scar Songs

Children show scars like medals. Lovers use them as secrets to reveal. A scar is what happens when the word is made flesh.

--Leonard Cohen

Contrary to what we may have been taught, unnecessary and unchosen suffering wounds us but need not scar us for life. It does mark. What we allow the mark to become is in our own hands.

--bell hooks

Some scars don't hurt. Some scars are numb. Some scars rid you of the capacity to feel anything ever again.

--Joyce Rachelle

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Life's lessons are bitter ways to sweetness.

--Herman J. Steinherr

THIEF CATCHER

At the age of sixteen, I worked after school and on Saturdays at Kroger's Grocery. I stuffed customers' purchases into brown bags, unloaded supply trucks, stacked heavy boxes on a hand dolly and wheeled them around like a graceful dancer, stamped prices robot-like on canned goods, and stocked them on the shelves as fast as customers removed them. I learned to trim and spray water on produce to make items like lettuce look fresh on display. A no-brainer job really, but it came with a uniform—a long, white, around-the-neck apron—and a box cutter.

While I enjoyed the work and the routines, there was a part to that job that after all these years still causes me some unease.

The store had a high ceiling, and only the staff knew of the passageway hidden behind the advertisements and sales posters covering three walls. Periodically and strategically placed along the passageway were peepholes that allowed views of different sections of the store, making it possible to watch any customer's movements. It was referred to as "The Watch Tower."

One day, Dave, the manager of the store in his white butcher cap and around-the-neck apron, stopped me from stamping prices on cans of Del Monte corn and gave me another task.

"See that woman with the long, dark dress over near the cereal aisle?" he asked.

She was hard to miss. It was summer, yet she wore a dark brown dress with long sleeves and a skirt that nearly reached the floor. Her hair was lost in some kind of a colorful turban wrapped around her head. She shuffled about, a bit bent over, and seemed to me just an old lady who had trouble walking.

I assured Dave I saw her.

"Get up in the Tower and keep an eye on her. She's acting strange."

This was a new part of the job. I'd never been up in the Tower before. The idea of spying on someone offered more excitement than stamping prices on cans. I felt as if some secret privilege and power had been granted me. So up I went, my heartbeat accelerating in anticipation.

I found the best spots in the hidden passageway to keep an eye on the woman in the dark dress as she moved about. Down below me, the entire store spread out like a huge colored map. Like most chain grocery stores, Kroger's had wide glass windows at the front entrance covered with huge posters promoting weekly specialties; several checkout counters as you entered; seven or eight long aisles of tempting, multicolored packaged goods from the floor up; a meat market counter case running along the left wall all the way to back doors hiding the freezer; a produce section stacked with fruit and vegetables taking up the wall on the right; and swinging doors in the back of the store where goods were stored, along with a walk-in refrigerated section to store and protect the produce from getting brown too fast. I worked down there where people were milling about, and I felt a sense of pride. I was protecting my domain. And no one could see me.

That's when it occurred to me. Had Dave or some employee ever spied on me while I worked?

As I watched my prey, I noticed that sometimes the woman would look around to see if anyone was near. If the aisle was devoid of customers, she seemed to have no trouble walking, but as soon as she was within sight of others, her walking reverted to an appearance of struggle. I wondered if Dave had noticed this and if that was why he sent me up there.

I observed her for several minutes. She took her time going up and down the aisles, stopping and examining an item here and there, then putting it back on the shelf. She would open

the glass door of the frozen food section, stare inside, then close the fogged-up door without taking anything out. I began to think that maybe she had just come to the store to get out of the heat and enjoy the air conditioning.

But then in the soap and notions aisle, her actions became clear.

For about the fourth time, she stopped in front of the various boxes of soap on display.

She looked around, saw no one, grabbed a medium-size box of Rinso, lifted her skirt, placed the box between her thighs, and dropped her skirt. It happened so fast, it took a moment to convince myself of what I saw, and I let out a little laugh.

She looked around to make certain no one had seen her and resumed her troubled walk.

Rather than leave the store, as I thought she now might, she went down the next aisle and grabbed a can of Campbell soup. Where was she going to hide that? But she surprised me and hobbled her way to the shortest checkout line.

I snapped to the realization that I was witnessing a possible shoplifting, and my job now was to run down from the Tower and tell Dave what I had seen. Since it looked as if she was going to pay for the can of soup, I had time, but, excited at what I had discovered, I went down the steps two at a time. When I reached the bottom, I searched down each aisle, trying to find Dave. Then I saw him standing near the butcher counter, his eyes already on the woman ready to steal a box of soap powder.

I tried waving my arms to get his attention, but he didn't see me, so I tried to look casual as I approached him. As I got closer, he noticed me, gave me a furtive look, but his eyes went back to watching the woman.

"Well?" he asked, not looking at me.

"Yeah. She took a box of Rinso."

Then his look questioned me. “Rinso? Where’s she hiding a box of Rinso?” “Between her legs. Under her skirt,” I said in an amused, can-you-believe-it tone.

His eyebrows furrowed as he nodded. “Aha. Good work. OK. Go back to what you were doing. I’ll take care of this.”

Well, I didn’t want to go back to what I was doing. I had caught a thief in the act, and I wanted to be in on the confrontation about to occur. But I didn’t want to get fired, either. So I went back to the canned corn-tomatoes-peas-beans-hominy aisle with frequent looks back at Dave as he stood near the door our soap thief lady would have to exit. Unaccountably, the advertising jingle “Rinso white, Rinso bright, Happy little washday song!” started jamming in my head.

The opened box of canned corn I had been price stamping was way down the aisle, so I couldn’t see what was happening at the checkout counter. To continue my spying, I moved the box of canned goods I was stamping toward the opening of the aisle where I could see what was about to transpire.

I watched as our Rinso thief paid for the Campbell soup and shuffled her way toward the exit. Before she got to the door, Dave stopped her.

“I believe you have forgotten to pay for the Rinso.”

“What?” the woman said, looking around, startled.

“Come on, now,” Dave said. “We saw you take it.”

“I . . . I . . .” the woman started to say something but never finished and started crying and moaning.

Now, from where I was positioned, I couldn’t see everything that happened, but here’s what I put together.

She dropped her small bag with the can of soup. The box of Rinso made a slight plop as it fell from between her thighs to the floor. Dave looked down and then jumped back, muttering something like “Oh Christ” as the woman yanked up her dress about twelve inches and tried to spread her feet as a puddle of pee began to form on the floor and on the dented box of Rinso.

I left my post and dashed to the front of the store. What I saw is a tableau forever burned in my memory: Gloria, the red-haired cashier, who had just unknowingly checked out the soap thief, stands with her back to the cash register, both hands covering her opened mouth, her eyes glued to the floor. The two customers in the checkout lane are peering around each other, trying to see what is happening. Dave stands there in his white butcher cap and apron, his managerial skills abandoned for the moment, staring at the box of Rinso getting peed on. The soap thief’s face shows a combination of embarrassment, fear, and a look that says she would rather be anywhere in the world but where she was, doing what she was.

“Rinso white! Rinso bright!”

Tableau over, Dave took off his butcher cap, revealing to me for the first time that he was bald. He scratched his head, flapped the cap against his thigh, and muttered, “God Almighty, lady! What the hell?”

Gloria, not understanding yet that the woman was stealing, felt sorry for the thief and offered her a box of Kleenex from under the counter. The woman was too traumatized to move. One of the women customers waiting to check out left her items on the counter and rushed out the door. Dave, putting his cap back on and regaining his managerial skills, yelled to anyone listening, “Get a mop and bucket! Clean this mess up. And Gloria, call the police!”

For some reason, I believed he wanted me to get the mop and bucket. I hated to leave the scene of the crime, but being a dutiful employee, I rushed to the back storeroom and spent too

much time finding them. By the time I returned to the front of the store, Dave, the Rinso lady, and two policemen were outside the store, writing up my spy work.

The bucket, of course, was empty and of no help. I remembered a faucet and hose outside that we used to clean off the sidewalk after unloading trucks, so I took the bucket outside and started filling it. The group fell silent when they saw me, and I realized they weren't going to continue until I left. Why weren't they asking me questions? I was the one who caught her. The woman, upon a closer look, appeared to be about my mother's age. She looked at me with hurt eyes, and I wondered if they told her I was the one who saw her steal the soap.

Back inside the store after filling the bucket, I looked out the window and watched the police take her away.

At first mop, I didn't feel it was my job to clean up her mess. Then I thought, well, maybe it was. I did spy on her. I did tell Dave about her. I'm the one who caused her to be arrested. But who was she? Why did she pay for a can of soup but try to steal a box of soap powder? Was she so poor she needed to steal soap? Did she have kids to feed? Had she stolen before? Did she have a history of theft? Would they really put her in jail for stealing a box of soap? Yes, I'd caught a thief, but I didn't feel at all good about it. In fact, I now felt sorry for her and wished I'd never been sent to the Tower.

I went back to stamping prices on cans of corn, and halfway through, I realized I was stamping the wrong price.

Just then, Dave approached me.

"Good job. Well done."

He put his hand on my shoulder. I didn't know whether he meant my mopping or being a spy.

"What's going to happen to her?" I asked.

“Don’t know,” he said. “Depends on her record. Anyway, not our problem now.”

Oh? I thought, looking down at the cans of corn. *Maybe not yours.*