

Madeline Ostrander

SCARS OF REGROWTH

Voices still droned in her head. Sometimes Mia saw her mother. Often Bradley's tense-muscled form seem to intrude into the air, and she could no longer breathe. But she was alone.

Her taut drugless nerves pulled her from sleep several times during the night. For breakfast, she spread peanut butter and instant coffee crystals onto stale bread. She arranged a game of solitaire on her floor and waited for midday, when she watched Americans on talk shows rave about their families and boyfriends. She gulped a can of beer and rubbed her swollen belly. She ran her hands along her inner thigh, fingered the lace-lined fringe of her underwear.

"Do you know you've got a freckle here?" Bradley had been high, clenching her ankles, trembling with sweat. He stared at her inner thigh, pressed his nose against her knee.

He lifted his eyes over her belly to pinpoint her pupils. She cringed, wanted to ask what in hell was wrong with him, but her tongue was thick and numbed by alcohol. "Do you know you always look so frightened, Mi, when I look you in the eyes? ... Like a dog," he grinned, tightening his grip around her ankles. "You afraid I'll do this?" He bit hard into her inner thigh, forcing a small yelp from her mouth.

She shuddered. She leaned forward, braying loudly, choking, gasping sobs one by one. Tears coated her eyelashes, stuck to her nose. She clenched her knees and rolled her forehead against the glass on the television screen. Then she tilted back, closed her eyes.

Days could pass like this, in a million eyeblinks always seeing the same things, the same hazed strip of trees outside the campervan window, the same people passing in and out of the laundry or the showers, slumping in lawn chairs on their tiny rented plots of grass.

Looking out the window behind her, she saw a dark man walk with an axe into the thicket of trees. From a distance, his face seemed creviced and rumped into a kind of bitter impassivity.

She blinked, and tilted her head toward the sink, trying to spit out a tough crust of bread. "Too many drugs this year," she muttered. She stared again at the thicket. Trees, only trees.

Mia pushes his hands off her breasts. They are standing in a thicket of trees. His skin glows like steel in the noon sun. "Something coming," she says. "Me," Brad says. He pushes her to the ground and begins to tear her clothes. Sound of motors behind her. A dove mourns from the trees. A voice sings, then whispers "Ngarl wort kurliny. Ngarl wort kurliny."

Her dreams shook her in and out of sleep during the night, but were forgotten by morning. She woke trembling at midday and dressed quickly. Her back prickled. Her hands felt numb. She spooned instant coffee crystals into her mouth and her pupils traced the mould stains on her wall. As she slapped her stomach rhythmically, a kookaburra cackled outside her window.

"Yack! Yack! Yack! Sounds like some old nutter cacking himself." Ailee had laughed. They had walked past the fountains in the park, stared at the golden and red kangaroo paws arrayed in rows in the garden beds.

Teal ducks waddled across the lawn. To Mia, the trees seemed to form an undifferentiated green haze over the city. Ailee plucked a caterpillar-like golden blossom from the edge of the pathway. "Hakeas are so funny, aren't they?" She stroked the flower's hairy body, smiling.

"Sure, Ail." She squeezed her fingers impatiently. Tree after tree. Nothing to look at.

When she rose, she tossed a T-shirt over her head and wrapped a towel around her waist. She fished her dirty knickers from the pile of clutter on her floor, tossed them into a dingy cloth sack and headed for the laundry. While her knickers soaked in a tub of bleachy water, she touched her toes to the warm pavement and stared at the thick shade under the thicket of trees behind the phones. Nothing else out in this empty country. Tree after tree.

Stillness hovered over the thicket, though the wind in the paved drive shoved her clothes and hair sideways. Grey clouds were massing over the sun, deepening the shadows. Mia tiptoed over the pavement onto the debris of nuts and dead bark, wincing as prickly shrubs chafed her calves. She huddled against a tree as rain began to spit out of the sky.

"Mi, Jesus, you walking me through a thorn patch or what?"

"I just want to sit in the shade. It's too hot in that damn caravan." Her head had been throbbing in the summer heat, and she had, atypically, raised her voice.

He wrenched her arm in response. *"Oh, Mi, this is dumb. This is what parks are for. Let's go somewhere with air-conditioning or something. It's not as though we*

have to go bush just because it's hot. You must think you're a bloody Aboriginal or something."

"Don't say that," she had muttered, fingering her broad flat nose, bunching up her stocky body. They had hunkered down silently against a tree, and she let herself go limp as he kissed her.

Ten metres away a moth alighted on the skin of a tall tree. Small pebbles and gum nuts bruised Mia's feet as she crept further into shadow. The tree's bark knobbed into a crusty elliptical scar at the base, like the lumpy skin around a deep pock-mark. Propping her knees against the roots, Mia traced the scar with her fingers, the regrowth crevices that radiated from its edges. Woody grains spiralled and condensed inward, like the eye of cyclone. In its centre, she could almost see a mouth opening and closing, a body running on stubby child toes. Mia lifted her diaphragm, letting air fill her chest cavity. She ran her hands along her own bulbous belly. She felt dizzy, and began to hum. A thump jiggled the inner surface of her womb. Mia laughed.

"Bradley, I'm pregnant. You've gotta get a job."

He had breathed deeply, sucking in the last bit of a cone from a crude apparatus he had constructed from an old juice bottle. He laughed. "What a stupid girl you are!"

Her mouth gaped. Her skin sagged puttylike. "Go back to your mum, Mia. Go back to the city. Go back to high school."

She lifted her fingers, groping for an invisible string of support. In a weak child-voice, she whispered, "But you love me."

He toppled into the flimsy mattress, his laughter shattering the air's crispness, and she fell backward, out the door. She ran behind the laundry and lay flat on the knobby parched grass, listening to empty air.

"Bradley?" He pulls his naked body away. His hands squeeze milk from her breasts until they lie wilted like smashed yams. He slashes her stomach with syringe needles. Pain like sharpened stones, like eagles' screaming.

Smoke sears her lungs. A woman's calloused fingers rub her skin, rub ash onto Mia's gashed belly. "Pal wort kurl kura," the woman mumbles. She hums, smooths a gummy resin over ash-filled welts. Woman twists her heels on the sand, tosses a cloth

on the ground. Ants swarm over it. Woman flicks them into the dirt and wipes the cloth over bruised arms, sweaty forehead. "Shh...shh," she whispers.

Mia rubs her own fingers against the oblong scar in her gut, the rough patches where the flesh lumps up. Grasses scratch against her waist. She hears children singing behind her. Laughter bubbles in her stomach. It feels round, full, like a moon. It quivers.

Mia returned from the market in the early afternoon with a sack of food and a bottle of vodka. As she crossed the drive of the caravan park, a black wren chirruped and fluttered spastically on the grass in front of her.

"Oh, no, the poor thing." A tiny grey-feathered songbird had sidled with one wing over the drive, its beak gaping open. Crouched on the pavement, Ailee had stroked it with her little finger.

"Mi, we've got to get going. Movie starts in half an hour." His voice sounded flat above the rattle of trucks on the street. The smell of petrol from the fuel station across the road pained Mia's nostrils.

"Yeah, but look at it. We can't just leave it here. It'll die." Ailee looked like a child crouching over a small toy. She gasped and lurched backward as Bradley's boot slammed down on the tiny blinking head. Blood smeared over his leather boots and along the rim of his pant leg. "Best to put it out of its misery," he said.

Mia shrieked. "Mum's gonna go off her nut, you idiot! Look at that all over the drive." Ailee covered her face with her hands.

Mia set her groceries on the pavement and unsealed a box of oatmeal. She scattered a handful of dried oats over the asphalt. The wren leapt into motion, frantically snatching up the fragments of grain. Mia hugged her shoulders, and thought of her mother, the way she could flit her slim bones along the street, the way men hovered about her like flies. She seized the full flesh that clung to her upper arms, and flattened her broad nose with her fingers, as if trying to remould it.

"Mi, I need a change. Sometimes I think I'm going crazy. At least in a big place, I can be a complete nutter and no one will notice."

Ailee's eyes had seemed to sink month by month into rings of purple. Under her thin blonde hair, her scalp was pink and sunburnt. "Mi, I see things, there, behind that caravan park. I thought it was just the place, but I think it must be me. I have really

spun-out dreams. I can't describe. Ever since Mum died, it's like ... it's like I see more ... but I see things that can't really be there ... Anyway, you and Brad can have the place while I'm gone."

The sky had spat rain that day; grey waves scoured the shore. "I think it would be good for you to move out of the house, anyway, out of the city scene. Away from all the hustle. Maybe you two can patch things up ... before he finds out." Ailee glanced at Mia's stomach.

Mia stroked the hairs around her navel. "Maybe you're right."

Mia squatted on the ground and vomited. Pain gripped her stomach. She clutched her jaw, stifling a long chain of sobs. She pressed her hands against her diaphragm until its contractions smoothed and became regular.

The wren hopped near her feet, cocking one round eye toward her face. Mia smiled weakly.

Face presses against the window. Mia crumples stale bread in palm, shapes it into birds; the birds speak. "Pal wort kurliny penang." They fly out the window. Shiny-skinned man bends his body over tree. Stone slices bark, carves lines into shapes—a shield. Shield hovers in air like a raven. Man holds it before her. Walks closer. Spits on her window.

Wind beats like wings over scaled skin. Exhaust fumes rise like bodies lifting out of the water. Car horns bleat in the distance. Tree sheds leaves onto her throat. She wretches on the sand. Fingernails blacken and fall off. They cling to the littered leaves, thin as cicada shells. Her hair seems to mould. Her skin is blotched. Babies squall behind her, then silence suddenly. Leaning her face in a puddle of vomit, sobs fill her.

Voices circle her, clicking in unintelligible syllables. She hears "waugalan" over and over, and the mournful wails of the women. Her skin is stringy solid, brown. Sickle-shapes ripple over her feet. The shiny-skinned man lifts an axe above her, weeping. "Your tree is dying, Watjela woman." He swings the blade into her waist.

A sharp headache pierced her sleeping brain and jolted her awake. Nausea seized her gut, and she clutched her knees to her chest for several minutes, breathing heavily. She rolled hip over hip out of the mattress, scooted along the crumb-covered floor and opened the latch of the caravan door. Early sunlight wafted out of the eastern sky. The roadways were still.

After several minutes panting, she walked into the drive. For the first time, she noticed a sign across the road speaking of a "quarantine" and "jarrah die-back." She creased her forehead, and tiptoed into the thicket of trees. She followed the strings of bark in the scarred tree up to its crown. Only one leafy branch broke the path of lightwaves bouncing off the morning clouds, and the leaves looked jaundiced and spotty. The others jutted nude into the sky like dislocated elbows. She turned her head and vomited into a wattle bush, leaned against the tree trunk and closed her eyes. Beneath her torso, a pool of thick blood congealed in the summer heat.

"Wort tjinang!" Old dark woman stretches her fingers over her own skin, furrow over furrow. Old woman palpates the furrows in the tree. Early sun slants orange onto the wide scar at the base. Old woman points east ... "Wort tjinang!" Behind her a snarling engine churns and crescendos. Mia turns ...

Mia turned her head into her own puddle of vomit and saw a chainsaw cracking through the trunks of the trees in the thicket. In the red sunrise, the hairlike splinters of wood seemed to bleed. She watched as the tree swayed northward, its shadow hovering over her. As she lifted one arm, a man in an orange construction hat stood over her, muttering in an unintelligible language.

Behind her, a deep-voiced woman was singing. She filled Mia's mouth with the sweet-honey flowers of banksias. Along the horizon, the trees arched their arms in the intricate web of a dance. As she traced her stomach, it seemed creviced by lines, eddying like the eye of a cyclone.

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