

Wonder Woman

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There is a scar in the center of my chest. A whitish and shiny round patch, the size of a silver dollar, the scar does not match the surrounding skin. It does not blend with its environment; it cannot not hide. Located just above what we might generously refer to as my "cleavage," this scar marks the place where a hard pad pressed into my skin for the months that I wore a back brace, known as the Milwaukee brace, when I was fourteen years old.

Here is a picture of the brace: Imagine a contraption that clasped my head in a metal loop, secured tight against my chin and the back of my skull. Metal posts connected the head restraint to a hard, plastic girdle that encased my pelvis and was locked shut at the back with straps, so tight that it left deep-red indentations in the soft flesh of my backside. Once in place, the whole thing resembled a medieval instrument of torture. I came to think of it as a cage that I carried around with me all the time. It was hideous, and it made me hideous.

While I was in the brace, it was impossible for me to move from hips to head. The cage held me in a rock-rigid grasp. I could not sleep curled up in a protective knot, as was my habit, but had to lie on my back like a corpse on a slab. I could not bend or turn side to side or look up or down. I could walk, but it was difficult to eat or talk because my chin kept hitting the metal loop around my head when I opened my mouth. I could not tip

my head to look down to the food on the plate in front of me and had to guess at what I might be forking into my mouth. I could go to school, and spend time with my friends, but I was always caged. I had to wear extra-large clothes to fit over the brace, and its hard unsightly lumps protruded through my clothes instead of the normal soft form of my girl's body. I could not see my own feet or reach down to tie my own shoelaces. If my shoe came untied at school, I had to ask a friend to tie it for me. Some kids asked if I'd been mangled in a car accident.

The clinical purpose of the Milwaukee brace was to maintain my girl's body in this unyielding position for a year until my back and shoulders grew accustomed to a center plumb line. Then I'd be released, ideally as a more perfect girl. One day I'll have to find out why Milwaukee gets credit for this instrument of torture. What I can tell you now is that my parents put me into this brace for reasons that were a complete mystery to me. They had threatened me with a back brace if I didn't stand up straight, a threat that I did not take seriously. At the dinner table, my father enforced the posture requirement by hitting the back of my head. Slouching made me ugly, apparently, or less than perfect, which for a girl was a moral stain. But I wasn't paying much attention to threats or perfection. I was a dreamy, distracted child with other things on my mind, far more interesting than my posture. This private realm of my imagination also offered an escape from beatings, so I went there often. When I failed to be mindful of my posture, my parents followed through on the threat. My mother and father presented this back brace to me as a punishment for my willful disobedience. This sounds crazy, I know. Why would anyone do that to their kid just to win a power game? But that was thrust of their argument at the time.

My mother was in charge of bringing me to the DuPont Orthopedic Clinic in Delaware. During the course of fitting me for the brace, one of the doctors took photographs of me wearing nothing but my underpants. They wanted to see how I stood on my own without anything in the way. My mother had smiled and waved me off. She held a Styrofoam cup of coffee decorated with a coral crescent of her lipstick. In the room alone with the strange man, the camera flash blinded me. I kept my gaze fixed on the sun-filled windows. Maybe if I did not look the man in the face then he wouldn't be able to see me. He showed me the photos afterward. I glanced

quickly, not wanting to see what had been recorded. I couldn't avoid taking away an image. Two purplish bruises in the center—those must have been my breasts. Above was an ugly, clenched fist of despair that I was shocked to recognize as my own face.

In the photos, naturally I stood with my shoulders curved forward. I was trying to shield my breasts from view. Wouldn't you, if you were a fourteen-year-old girl, naked and alone in a room with a strange man and his camera?

On the day that the doctors strapped me into this mobile prison for the first time, as the metal bars closed around me, my mind went blank with shock. My vocabulary did not contain the words to protest. I was stunned by the trap that I didn't see coming.

In the car on the way home, still I said nothing, yet I couldn't stop my tears from flowing down my chin. Without taking her eyes from the road, my mother snapped, "What are you crying about?"

When we arrived at the house, my initial shock collapsed into mute compliance. I was half-expecting someone, my mother perhaps, to relent. To say this was all just a bit of theater, designed to scare me straight up and down. But that reprieve never came. The brace was solid on my body, holding me in a hard restraint a little free girl had never felt.

I was permitted just one hour a day out of the brace to bathe and was supposed to wear it even when sleeping. On that first night, once darkness took over, the thin shell surrounding my compliance shattered. A wild animal exploded from inside me, making the noises an animal makes when cornered. I started screaming uncontrollably. The sounds made me unrecognizable, even to myself. I found the words. I shrieked to God, begging for death. My shocked mind seized on death as the only way I'd get out of this cage. No one came to my aid. Not God, not my mother, who remained in her own bedroom, steeling herself to ignore my screams. I'll never know why she made that decision. It's a blank page in my history.

In later days, when my father felt called to discipline me for some infraction, he did so by grabbing the front metal post of the back brace, lifting and shaking me like a ragdoll. My head jolted in the metal restraint. I was trapped and immobilized in the cage, where he had consigned me. Seared into my memory is the vision of my father's smile. Then he spat on my face, just to nail the fun. I was too young to name sadism when I saw it,

but the pleasure he took in my defenseless anguish was unmistakable. The back brace, misery-inducing as it was on its own merits, became his access point to double down on the torture with an added dose of humiliation.

None of this was clear to me then in any articulate form. I was just a rough girl animal, trying to survive her own childhood with meager weapons. But I got it deep in my flesh and bones, that this father animal was aroused to violence *because* I was vulnerable. My physical immobility was precisely the thing that drove him to new heights of torment. It seemed to be sport for him. A weird dominance trip, maybe? Who gets off on tormenting a cornered child? I'll leave that question for the dark side of my father's peculiar kink where no one wants to go.

When the brace's pad rubbed open a red hole in my chest, my mother showed the weeping pus-filled wound to my father because she expected him to do something about it. He accused me of intentionally inflicting injury on myself as a maneuver to get out of the brace. For my deceit, he ordered that I'd have to live with this hole in my chest until my next scheduled check-up because, "We can't bother the doctors with every little thing." That would certainly teach me a lesson. Should I tell you that my father is a doctor? Does that matter? It seems that when considering an injury in his own child's flesh, he lost the intelligent care that he might offer a stranger. If a patient came into his hospital with a wound like mine, my father would clean it, dress it, and order antibiotics. I know that because that's what happened a month later when I finally saw a doctor at the clinic. I sat on an examining table while a nurse tugged at my shirt. The fabric was glued down by my blood. I recall the expression on his face when he exposed the wound. Wonder. Or maybe it was horror? We're in fine-line territory here.

"Hey, you gotta come see this," the nurse called out to his colleagues. A cluster of clinicians gathered around to stare at the hole in my chest. One guy took photos of this spectacular mess. I remained silent and still on the examining table, an interesting specimen, well documented.

So I got a good scar out of that whole thing. It reminds me that a girl died in her bed one night. Her heart kept beating. She could still walk and talk. But the girl was gone. A caged creature was born in her place, an animal as merciless as her keepers.

I would like this to be a different story. I wish I could tell it differently. This is not the first time I've assayed this ground. Yet each time I dig up the memory, nothing but raw, abject suffering rises to show itself. I don't have a choice in how I was made. Spiritually-minded people would say otherwise, but I'm not even sure I have a choice in how I tell the story. I guard the details because they're true. My hope is that looking again may help me find a key that fits the hole in the center of my chest.

A term has gained currency nowadays. Gaslighting. Although it's gotten a lot of traction, the term and the practice are not new. It originates from a 1938 play called *Gaslight*, which was remade into a film in 1944. The main character, played by Ingrid Bergman, is subjected to psychological torture by her husband, played by Charles Boyer, who manipulates her environment to reframe her credible apprehension of his malice as insanity. The great thing about having a term to identify what my parents were doing, punishing me for the suffering that they had inflicted, is that now I can point and shoot. "Gaslighting," I say, and it's understood who did what. I don't have to doubt my own understanding of these events. It really did happen in the way that I remember. Still, the term does not go far enough to relieve suffering. Does not provide a satisfying explanation. Or advice on how to move forward. Sometimes I just want to say: "That was some fucked up shit." And leave it there. But that doesn't entirely satisfy either because I have this thing in the center of my chest that won't let me go in peace. I am changed by this scar, and I can't rest until I find a way to wear it so that it doesn't flag me as a loathsome animal in a cage.

So I did research. Twenty years after my release from the cage, I requested a copy of my medical records from the clinic. I read the pages and then put them away for another twenty years. It has taken that long for me to work up the guts to interrogate the contents. I thought that if I could grasp the facts, that might anchor my harrowing memory in a foundation outside raw suffering. Facts are always a good addition to a story.

In the sheaf of typed pages, I made the discovery that at age fourteen I had been diagnosed with a condition called "postural kyphosis" or as it's more informally known: slouching with rounded shoulders. The condition is hereditary and though some boys display this posture, it is most often

found in adolescent girls. Postural kyphosis is not fatal, not painful, and not particularly life-changing either. It is not a skeletal abnormality but a habitual way of standing that can be corrected voluntarily or “under stress” to use the orthopedic lingo. If you tell a girl with postural kyphosis to stand up straight, she can do it . . . if she *feels like doing* what you told her to do. What researchers do not establish, but I’d be happy to spell out here, is that you don’t have to be a genius to see that an adolescent girl, upon absorbing the relentless hammer blows of her inferior status as female, and in particular the shame of having these grotesque things hanging off her chest (*breasts!*) would develop a way of standing so that her shoulders curve forward and around to shelter or hide this vulnerable part of her body. She hates these new breasts because they have made her a target for ridicule and hostility, but they’re attached to her body, so she has to love them also. It’s a trap. Lots of girls fall into it.

My medical records cannot be treated as authoritative. These notes from the doctors who examined me in 1977 turn out to be as much art as science, a work of imaginative narration, at times revealing while also raising unanswerable questions. One example of the reliability problem is in the medical history section, where I read that my mother “may have mild diabetes.” I happen to know that’s not true, and I can’t imagine how this incorrect note appeared in my medical history. We expect perfection from doctors, but we shouldn’t.

There are notes on my ability to straighten my posture—“Can be corrected with stress.” In this case “stress” means that upon command I was able to force myself upright. The record indicates “kyphosis is minimal, not obliterated by stress, but it did not seem excessive originally.” The number of degrees that my posture deviated from the norm was considerably less than the threshold for a Milwaukee brace. Why then would the doctor prescribe such a draconian treatment, when the standard of care for a mild postural kyphosis like mine is physical therapy, not a brace? The pages don’t give an answer. In the murk surrounding this question is a secret from the brotherhood of doctors. When a thoracic surgeon, such as my father, requests a certain treatment for his child, even if not explicitly needed, doctors are far less inclined to deny that request. As a professional courtesy. It’s not malpractice per se, as there is some leeway in diagnostics. That’s why people get second opinions. My father procured the punishment that he wanted for me.

There is one particular note in the record that differs from all the others. It's the only piece of writing that allows for the fact of my existence as a fully human child, rather than a specimen for study. I'm not named in these notes. I am only "she."

"According to her mother," the doctor wrote, "she has withdrawn from her social activities because of the unsightly appearance of the Milwaukee brace. She did not have too many social activities before, but now she has none." That was it. The sum total of my suicidal despair executed in two sentences. I stare at these words, and I am struck by their pallid inadequacy. The words supposedly refer to me. Yet when I look for the girl in this summary, I can't find me at all. It's a shock to read words from my mother and the physicians tasked with my care and hear them fall so short of my experience. They had no idea who I was. This gap in the record sends me in search of story. I want words to describe what happened, make a narrative that aligns my memory with a reliable structure. The words deployed by doctors or my parents won't do it. The only text I have that reads true is this shiny patch of scarred skin in the center of my chest. Any other narrative is a cover-up. Or a profound failure of language.

Lots of people have a kyphosis, a few in my family, I've noticed. My father, my mother, my brother, and my sister all walk around with poor posture; their shoulders curve toward their chest, and their necks tilt forward. My brother, who would be six feet tall under the best of circumstances, stands about five foot ten inches when he sinks into this accustomed and unthinking posture. For as long as I can remember, my dad has held himself in a sort of spinal question mark. When standing upright, he can look at the tops of his shoes without bending at the waist. These are deviations from the norm that would not be noticeable to most people. I am not most people.

When my sister walked down the aisle on her wedding day, escorted by her two teenage sons on each arm, with her hair styled in gleaming waves, draped over the front of her dress, I was watching. Me with my scar in my chest and my eyes in my head, I can't stop myself from seeing some things, unmistakable to my poisoned vision. I could see her kyphosis. Her shoulder blades pushed through the white lace back of her dress just a bit, and her neck, her lovely swan's neck, adorned with a string of pearls, jutted out a

fraction over the front neckline of her wedding dress. There was no elegant straight up and down on this bride. My sister does not have the posture of a ballerina. She slumps like a regular woman in her forties, on her way to be married for the second time to a thoroughly kind and decent man who adores her. Can I tell you now that my sister is graced with the effortless beauty of a sylph? That the sheer force of her physical splendor causes men to stop and stare on the street? I can tell you that; however, I must also tell you that my attention has been so deeply scarred by my own past that when I look at anyone, even this sister, beloved of mine—I hand-raised her from a pup—I can't stop myself from seeing the flaw in her otherwise magnificent body.

And because I have the insider view here, I can also tell you this flaw has not diminished her life. It has not distanced her from the people she loves. It has not destroyed her self-confidence. Or caused her to dream of killing herself. It has not made her feel lonely or afraid or monstrous. It has not filled her with murderous rage against herself and the whole world. It has not made her a target for canny sociopaths, sniffing out weakness and self-loathing.

This flaw has not done any of that to my little sister because no one ever told her she had this flaw. And no one punished her for being flawed. My sister is not technically perfect in her body, but she is perfectly fine.

On this wedding day in that church, I saw that Wonder, in her white dress, had arrived. A bride with some age and miles on her. Beneath her white wedding dress, my sister also wore the scars of a double mastectomy. No loss, I contend now, but a new creation. This Wonder Woman rose from the unwholesome flesh left behind, the invaders scalped from her chest. Her scars, like a trophy, signify triumph over an enemy, but also comprise an updated version of herself. She lives inside a new body that carries the marks of what made her.

The scar on my chest is small by comparison to the scarlet streaks I recall from my sister's unveiling after her surgery. Yet, I feel we are bound together through our chest scars. A protective impulse sent me on a plane from New Orleans to New York to be with her for the mastectomy. This was years before her (wonderful) second wedding day. When my sister was diagnosed with breast cancer, she was still in her first marriage, and her boys were little. The day after surgery, the doctor stopped by her hospital room to remove the bandages, to inspect his handiwork, check for infection, look for good edge adhesion. I offered to leave the room.

"Your privacy," I said to my sister.

"No, stay," she answered. "I want you to see this."

Was she afraid? Did she want her big sister there to make it less frightening, to be a friendly witness, my face a face she knows from her infancy? Or was she demanding a brave and stark reckoning of the truth on her chest? It's hard to say. My sister is a badass but with baby-doll tendencies, a porous nature that can either succumb to tears under duress or flatten the fool who vexes her. Could go either way.

The only other people in the room for this unveiling were the surgeon, a man as congenial as a steak knife, and my sister's idiot first husband, who at the time unbeknownst to us, had been regularly shtupping a 23-year-old who worked in a dress shop down the road from the house where his wife and children slept. In the following year, her hair reappearing after chemo, my sister will boot this lazy philanderer onto the trash heap, but for the moment he played a role in this hospital scene. With so many super helpful men around, maybe my sister wanted me there, as a fellow breast-wearing person. To check in with me for an informed assessment, at the moment she had to see her own breasts gone.

So I stayed to witness. To be an empathetic face to hold her distress. As the surgeon lifted away the damp gauze, I watched my sister's face. I did not glance at her chest. Instead I watched her eyes dip below and then up to meet my gaze. Her face was a mobile study of cascading emotions, first shock, then despair and emptiness. A sense of wonder. She pressed her lips together. A wave passed over her features. She said goodbye to her old body right then. It was quick. Her chest, I did look at last, was all dark raspberry wreckage, not a woman's chest anymore but a battlefield where womanliness had been destroyed. Unrecognizable. And I confess to a sense of wonder, myself. What *was* this new fleshy landscape we were seeing? Nothing we could have ever known before. This scene of defilement rejected everything we understood about being a woman. She looked at me again with a different expression. *All right*, her face seemed to say. *This is it now*.

A day later, I accompanied my sister down the hospital hallway. The nurses had hustled her out of bed and onto her feet, as soon as possible. It's a thing that nurses do. They hate seeing people rest in bed. As she walked, my sister dragged a wheeled IV stand that held bags of fluid connected to

her body, an octopus of dangling plastic tubes. She wore a hospital gown, bathrobe, and slippers, and shuffled along the linoleum, hunched and wincing with each step. I kept a slow pace beside her. My sister came to an abrupt stop and looked around the floor with an alarmed expression.

“What’s wrong?” My heart rate went up. I was supposed to be her guardian and treat her like spun glass.

“Wait a minute!” she said and patted the pockets of her robe, searching frantically. “I seem to have misplaced my breasts.”

“Oh *Jesus*.”

She was pleased with herself because she totally had me going, which doesn’t happen often. “You’ve been practicing that joke in your head, haven’t you?” I said.

“Just waiting for the right time,” she answered and continued her slow Wonder Woman walk, down the hospital corridor toward her future.

While recovering at home, she still wore the dangling tubes and struggled with small movement, unable to raise her arms above her waist. I stayed for a time to help by ferrying the kids to their playdates and school. A rotation of volunteers, women from the neighborhood, dropped off a casserole each day, always with an accompanying pile of brownies or cookies. One afternoon, as I was snarfing down my third brownie, I made some reflexive complaint about how fat I was getting.

“Who cares?” my sister yelled, her mastectomy voice cutting through the kitchen and my nonsense. Then once more, louder, “Who *really* cares?”

At a later time when the worst of it was over, I asked my sister, “Do you grieve the loss of your breasts?” To my mind, this question had an obvious answer because *I* would grieve *my* breasts if they were gone. In fact, I’d be devastated because I adore my breasts now. Since my adolescence, I have come to appreciate their beauty, and I’m really attached to them. My identity as a woman is intrinsically invested in this part of my body. In asking my sister this obvious question, I tried to place myself into her experience and imagine the sorrow she must feel—she had fed her children with these breasts, after all. My sister surprised me.

“No, I don’t miss them,” she said. “Once I knew these things were going to kill me, it was easy. *Just take them*, I said. *Get ‘em out of me.*”

The clarity of her position knocked me back. Could it be that simple? Yes, it could. When Wonder Woman recognizes a deadly enemy, she doesn’t

waste time coddling its hostile advance. She eradicates the threat without a second thought. She remains a Wonder Woman even without breasts. Not the cartoon character drawn in primary colors but her ancient predecessor from the Amazon warrior tribe who, in the mythos, cut off their own breast in order to operate a bow and arrow with better efficiency. In this vision, my sister is a Woman incandescent with Wonder because *she* decides what makes her a woman—not a pound or two of flesh.

To this day, I still marvel at my sister's ability to heal unweighted by malingering grief. We should all be so good at survival.

When I was old enough to wrest control of my body away from my parents and make my own decisions about who would touch me and who would not, the scar in the center of my chest became something of a lightning rod. Once I caught my father staring at it. He murmured a vaguely obscene remark about buying me an emerald pendant to cover the scar.

"No thanks," I said. The next words I kept to myself: Don't even bother. They haven't made an emerald big enough to pay for this damage.

Before that moment I had been mortified by my scar, thought it made me monstrous. But then I began to see it as a badge of defiance. This bogus offer of an emerald gave me an odd sense of power that tipped me toward wearing my scar with pride. This shiny patch of skin could be a signpost that marked the close of an innocent stage of life and initiation into a new wisdom. When my father looked at this mark on my chest, he'd have to see evidence of his own weird cruelty. My scar glowed in the dark of his guilty thoughts. He offered a jewel to his daughter to banish the sight of his own sin and because well . . . that's what women want right? Ply them with expensive gifts to make them forget what happened. These shallow creatures love shiny baubles more than freedom from suffering. My dad was working straight from the Abuser's Handbook. I hadn't read this volume, but I could recognize the smell of a rotten conscience.

"No thanks," I said and coolly moved on, wearing my scar like a trophy.

Later there was a man who wanted to be my lover. He told me that when he spied the scar above the top button of my blouse, the sight had captivated him, deepening his desire. The scar had made him wonder—that

word again—what happened to me that I should have a scar, tantalizingly placed near the opening of the blouse he so wanted to unbutton. “Did she have heart surgery?” he had asked himself. He was telling me this story after the launch of our affair. We were in bed. By that time, he had familiarized himself with the remote corners of my landscape, but the scar on my chest was still tickling his thoughts. It was an aspect of my body that he didn’t anticipate. Women weren’t supposed to come with scars, were they? They were supposed to be as smooth as Barbie dolls. The mark on my chest should have been a blight on my beauty, making me less than the feminine ideal. Yet it made this man want me more. *How intriguing*, I thought.

“Yes, it was heart surgery,” I told him, a near-truth that came close enough.

In that moment I didn’t feel like telling him the sordid tale of the scar. How to describe what happened in its truest form. How to explain the wound, a red hole ringed by thick accumulating pus, without proffering the graphic scenery. That my piercing vision could see through the gloppy infected tissue to the bone underneath, the sternum (also called the breastbone), which shelters the heart from harmful outside force. The pressure from the back brace coming down hard on my sternum made this hole. On a skinny girl like me, there was almost nothing between my sternum and the world. You’d have to break this bone if you wanted to do open heart surgery on me. Or conversely, if you wanted to torture me, you would drive a hook attached to a rope and pulley, under my sternum and lift my body off the ground. And on it goes in my telling . . . You see how this story could be a real mood killer?

Or maybe there is this version: On the subject of pus, I could say my white blood cells recognized an invader, even if I didn’t at first. These warriors of my immune system battled the infection caused by this foreign object trying to penetrate my skin. Pale yellowish pus sure is ugly, but healing is not supposed to be pretty. The scar that remains has to be something greater than pretty to make this a story. Let’s call the scar a keyhole in a door that opens me now and always—the door to my suffering is also the door to my truth. The door to myself.

None of this was entirely persuasive, even to me. So I said nothing more. This man placed his lips to my scar and kissed it. How had I missed this before? The mark of my suffering had led me here. Over and over he

turned my body, giving attention to what wanted love. The simplicity of the answer—yes, it's love—just that, really. I ache with the truth of it. This bone, at the center of who I am, sheltered my heart. This hole in my chest closed up eventually but was not filled. Only loving touch, a caress that loves what *has been* harmed may fill this emptiness with wonder.

When I transformed my scar into a keyhole, my door opened to this new pleasure. Now I carry it as a badge that made me a Wonder Woman. Too soon, too young, and my transformation took years to complete, but still my own way. I had no other choice.

Understanding the point of scars made by suffering might come in time, or not. Is there ever a reason for suffering? I'm not convinced there has to be a point, beyond the essayist's hunger for neat formulations. Perhaps the philosophers are right; suffering is the thing that happens along the way toward making us. My baby sister knew that instinctively. I took decades. Who cares?

For now, I'm done with research. I don't need more facts to illuminate the past. Instead, I'd like to try living free of those restraints. Watch me move within the wonder that springs from this brute experience of living inside a body. We are held by the ridges of hardened flesh that show where we've been torn. A baby's skin is perfect. A woman's skin is wonderful. That is to say, filled with wonder and provoking wonder. A woman's body says: *See, how I became this complex human creation. Through this and then this . . .* The shocks make her body a glorious map. You can read her. It's a story.