

SALEEMA NAWAZ

Scar Tissue

PATTI THINKS THAT THERE is too much to be packed up and put away. She sits at the kitchen table, tapping a spatula against a sauce pan, breathing in the musty rich fragrance of saffron rice undercut by cardboard. The boxes surrounding her are half-filled, jumbled with possessions she can no longer account for: a large wooden spool with four nails in the end, a feathered headband shedding yellow fluff, an aged maraca made from a gourd, its seeds sounding high and constant in its hollow. The beginning of packing is always like this, with Patti moving from room to room, picking up things that seem strange and dropping them into the first boxes of nonessentials, things she won't need again until she gets to wherever it is she is going to be.

If David were here, he would urge her to throw this stuff out, call her a pack rat, toss her a black garbage bag from under the counter, his blond eyebrows intimating resolve rather than indulgence. Patti prefers to save decisions about what's worth keeping until later, after she's settled. But the muddled boxes have a look of commotion about them, like the beginning of a desperate journey, and Patti gets up to move them one by one out of sight beneath the blue-checked cover of the kitchen table. The boxes squeak as she slides them along the linoleum, and the babies in their playpen, on the other side of the plastic gate, respond with quiet blather. Clara, three, who can climb in and out of the playpen at will, leans against its mesh side, peering at a picture book in her lap, muttering as she turns its thick, board pages. Benjamin, who is almost old enough to crawl, lies on his stomach at her feet, encountering a stuffed rabbit at eye level and cooing at it as though expecting a response. Outside, through the opened patio door, Ryan tosses a ball in the backyard. His blue eyes are narrowed in a squint as he fumbles every catch with a glove still too big for his hand.

Patti watches the steam escaping from the pot of rice before turning back to the table. She has the paraphernalia of moving lined up before her

like instruments in an operating theatre. Unmade boxes, scissors, packing tape, two black Sharpie markers for when one gets mislaid. Moving is a procedure. Pen and paper for the detailed master list that she will type up and print before they pack the computer. Once she gets somewhere new, Patti likes being able to find things right away. Light bulbs. A frying pan. Her black leather skirt. Now that she has children this is even more important. Thermometers, teething rings, favourite toys. The children, like her, are needy, fussy, and fragile. Patti believes in humoring them.

When a bee flies in the opened patio door with a drone like a passing motorbike, Patti gives an involuntary shriek. Ryan runs inside as Benjamin starts to wail, his cries sputtering into two-second pauses before he commits himself to unhappiness.

What's the matter? asks Ryan, taking Patti by the wrist where she stands between the table and the stove. Ryan has a strange solicitousness when it comes to Patti. David thinks this is because Ryan carries an unconscious memory of abandonment, from when his real mother dropped him off at the age of two with only a red pair of pyjamas and a knapsack full of ID. Patti thinks Ryan just likes to model himself after his father.

Nothing's the matter, sweetheart, she says. I was startled by a bee that snuck up on me.

Tiptoe, says Clara from the playpen. One red curl tucked in the corner of her mouth escapes and shines with spit. Patti is always surprised by the eclecticism of childhood vocabulary. The manatees, anvils, and double-barrelled dinosaurs that make appearances before words like picnic or daydream. Shhhhhhh, Clara says, either to the bee or to her brother. The bee flies out, but Benjamin is still upset, and Patti steps over the plastic gate and bends to lift him to her chest. Ryan begins to follow, but the gate is high and sturdy for even a seven-year-old, and he knows better than to try and shift it without asking. Since Clara's accident, Patti doesn't let the littlest ones in the kitchen.

The phone rings. Grasping Ben in a firm hold, Patti reaches to answer the cordless, propped on its wall charger beside her.

Is David there? A woman's voice she doesn't recognize.

No, I'm afraid not. Would you like to leave a message?

But the phone has already gone dead.

David, not Mr. McAdams, or David McAdams even.



Patti met David at a poetry reading where she was playing flute to accompany Grizzald, a spoken word artist she'd met in high school. She'd

known him as Graham of the plaid pants, the drummer from jazz band, until she ran into him at the grocery store, fumbling over the remains of a depleted veggie burger section.

I handed him the last package of nut burgers, and he asked me if I still played, said Patti, revolving her beer bottle on the aged wooden table. Condensation ran over her fingers. Looking at David sitting across from her, where he'd planted himself after asking for tips on getting into the poetic flautist business, she realized why she'd agreed to do something so exhibitionist. She took in his fitted olive t-shirt and wondered if anyone was watching them.

I hadn't played in ages, of course, said Patti, but I still had my flute and thought I could fake it well enough for a bunch of literary types. She raised an eyebrow, implicating herself in the slight. Lit student, she said, thumb at her chest. Patti.

When he introduced himself, Patti blinked and confirmed his name. She had just read one of his articles in the Saturday paper, an interdisciplinary essay tying together photography, literature, and popular culture. It turned out that he was a prolific freelancer.

You're what they call a man of letters.

Why, I suppose so, said David. He looked pleased and downed a third of his beer.

Patti said she was impressed that he made enough to live on, and David admitted that he also taught at colleges.

In fact, I principally teach at colleges, he said. She laughed.

He bought her another beer and they talked about books. When Patti decided to take a ride home with Grizzald, David gave her his card. She rubbed her thumb over the black embossed letters before putting it in the back pocket of her jeans.

I don't have a card, said Patti. But I work mornings at the Wheat Stone. I'm the pastry chef.

Patti cake, David said.



The new house has five bedrooms, a sprouting vegetable garden, and a wide front veranda that makes Patti think of porch swings and the Old South, though this is mostly a cinematic fantasy. Two neighbourhoods over from where they live now, the house stands in a place where the yards are bigger and a semi-detached townhouse like their own is a rarity. David wanted to use the settlement money to get a house with a pool, but Patti worries it would be tempting fate. She happens to know that backyard

swimming pool drownings are the second leading cause of accidental death in toddlers, after car accidents. There are a number of these facts that she has memorized, as though with a catalogue of statistics she might buffet away risk, like a batter hitting out fastballs from the plate. She is already nervous about the unknown hazards that await them. At their home, she keeps a mental archive, a register for her vigilance: the long worn rug in the hallway with a tendency to slip away underfoot, the basement door that flies open, yawning black and grim down the steep pitch of its staircase. The front window that bangs down on sluggish fingers. The gas stove. At the new place, it will be all surprise, something Patti rarely finds cause to welcome.

David says they owe the new house to his friend Paul. Paul is a lawyer, a litigator. The one who knew to go after the nightgown manufacturer.

The nightgown was an acrylic velour, in deep purple with a flowing pink trim. Jan, David's mother, picked it up at a garage sale. She had a good eye for treasure and a great memory for the holes in Patti's inventory.

I noticed you don't have a cast iron skillet, she said, carrying over a green enameled pan, the wooden handle only slightly scorched. It's Le Creuset, she said. It'll last forever. She had a reverence that Patti didn't quite understand.

Thanks, said Patti.

Later, Jan brought over a toy Patti had mentioned from her own childhood, a telephone on red wheels with lolling eyes and a tuneful locomotion.

Fisher-Price classic, said Jan. Now it's like you've passed it down to Clara and Ben.

Then there were the things Patti hadn't realized she wanted until she saw them: a crystal punch bowl with twenty shallow glasses hanging along its scalloped rim. Favourite board games for the kids, like Clue and Monopoly, their pieces and cards carefully enumerated by Jan for completeness.

The nightgown was a little big, but Clara adored it. Dwess, she called it. She cried every time Patti peeled it off her to get it in the wash.

It went up in a flash, melting right into the skin. It was David who told his mother how it happened, though it would have come out later, anyway, with the lawsuit. Jan was devastated.

I guess there are regulations now, she said to Patti, her voice catching, with the manufacturing and all. New safety stuff for kids' clothes. I never thought.

Me neither, said Patti.

Paul the litigator said, it's a good thing you've done here, but Patti couldn't be so sure. A struggling Canadian textile company settled out of

court and went under. Patti and David were going to move out of their small but perfectly serviceable house into a much larger, three-story home. Hadn't she read somewhere that on average Canadians had the largest houses in the world? She thinks it may only give them more space in which to be apart from one another.



Patti first met Ryan a few weeks after she and David were married. Blossom, his mother, appeared outside their walkup apartment in a beige Toyota Tercel with a faulty muffler. She was young and exceptionally beautiful. She was carrying Ryan, who was two, asleep against her chest in spite of the noise of the drive and his removal from the car.

I thought you might want to finally meet your son, she said, when David and Patti answered the door.

Okay, said David.

Blossom was wearing a jean skirt made from cutoffs and a low, tight yellow tank top. There was an attitude of impatience in the way she clattered her silver bangles up and down her arms, swinging her dark hair back behind her shoulders. She had a sensuous, no-nonsense air about her, as though anything not sensuous might strike her as nonsense. For Ryan, she had a gentle but not inefficient touch. With the fluidity of one motion, she wiped his mouth, stroked his cheek with her thumb, pushed his hair out of his face and patted him once on the head as she passed him off to David. Aren't you going to invite me in? she said, swabbing the back of her arm against the spot of drool Ryan had left at the top of her breast.

Inside, Blossom ignored Patti, who poured herself a glass of iced tea and went to sit on the balcony on a decorative bench given to them by David's older brother and his wife. She thought about Blossom's name and remembered a guy she had dated in university, so repressed and fresh out of Bible college that he could scarcely walk by flowers without blushing. They just seem obscene, he said when Patti mentioned it. All those sex organs blooming in plain sight.

It didn't seem long before she heard the door slam. When she heard a rumbling clamour on the street, she came back inside, setting her glass down in the sink with a measure of resolve. She strode into the living room to find Ryan stirring on David's lap.

She said she would be right back, said David. His voice sounded strained. He said, she told me she had some photos in the car.

David contacted Paul, who tried and failed to track Blossom down. In Ryan's tiny backpack she had left only his birth certificate, with David

listed as the father, his immunization records, and a half-emptied bottle of orange Triaminic.

Paul said, what a cold-hearted bitch.

David said only, I think she was pissed I got married. His face was mild.

Ryan himself was sweet and seemed only slightly bereft. Patti tried to figure out what to do and ended up taking a leave from work.

I didn't think he was ever going to be a part of our lives, David told her by way of apology. It hurt to even imagine him. Blossom left town and never got in touch with me again.

Patti watched his face and believed him. He described Blossom as a two-night stand he'd met just before Patti, though Patti figured they had probably dated.

It might have been their ages, as David had almost twelve years on Patti, or his natural reticence when it came to talking about himself, or some basic, preserving part of her that didn't want to ask, but they had never done a big rundown of previous lovers. Over the few years they'd been together, Patti had, more or less, told him about everybody in one way or another, but David's litany had long gaps, more lacunae than substance to make it up out of.

This is the way to do it, said David one day, his hand on her waist as they watched Ryan in the park. Get our babies by delivery. No morning sickness, no swollen ankles. No wretched mood swings and absurd fights.

Patti wondered if he had seen Blossom during her pregnancy. She said only, well, there are some things about making babies that do interest me.



Ryan looks exactly like David, as though his mother was only an incubator, a transcriptionist, rather than the author of half his genes. The same white-blond hair and blue eyes like glacial runoff, clear and almost aquamarine. A slight cleft to the chin and already a hint of David's cheekbones, the kind that Patti would have paid money for if she believed in that sort of thing.

David's looks are the flint in their fire. She had always dated intelligent men, the bookish, self-deprecating kind who let her in on every joke. But David is a different kind of animal, a writer and scholar in the body of a farmer, strong and broad enough to be hooked up to a yoke himself. Patti responds to him with a bare appetite that leaves no room for her usual embarrassment.

Once the kids are asleep, he kicks aside two boxes of her winter sweaters, steering her by her hips towards the bed.

You should pack up all of your clothes, he says, laying her down. Every last little thing.

He stares her in the eyes as they touch each other, noses her face in what feels to her like affection. She wants to shrink from the intensity of his gaze. At the same time, she likes the heavy, sumptuous feeling of being seen by him.

You have the most beautiful eyes, says David, putting one hand to the side of her face. I could lose myself.

But it is in these moments that Patti herself feels found, as though a simpler version of her has been created, summoned out of skin and sweat, that she can slip into like a dressing gown, one as bright and redemptive as a life jacket.

Afterwards, he brings her a warm, wet cloth, already wrung out.

A whole new bedroom soon, he says. Just think.

Patti says, I missed you all day today. The phone kept ringing and it wasn't you.

I'm here now, says David. Right now.



Ryan is hers, and yet he isn't. Like David. Like even Clara and Benjamin, if Patti is truly honest with herself, though she only thinks this at her gloomiest, most philosophical moments, usually when she is cleaning the bathroom or doing some other task she does not enjoy. She thinks, they will grow up and give themselves to other people, and those other people will be more important to them than me. She broods about this as she puts away the groceries, stacking cans of tuna into a tower of her future supplanters: friends, girlfriends, boyfriends, wives, husbands. Children. Lovers.

Patti's first approach to Ryan was one of loose affection, mindful of the day that Blossom might choose to reappear. But no matter how breezy or unconditional she tries to feel, she lies awake fretting that he will be seized without warning. David's attempts to comfort her are practical. I'm his father, he says. If she comes back, I'll still have rights. Then with his thick fingers buried in the hair at the base of her skull, he kisses her forehead, rolling her over to face him. And you've got rights over me, he says. In case you'd forgotten. Then his hand, pulling hers to his chest and sliding it down.

In the daytime, Patti cannot believe her claims on David to be any less tenuous or circumstantial. She feels as though she merely stepped within

the frequency of romance and the world responded. At the wedding, David's friends and family seemed both congratulatory and amazed, and Patti sensed their confusion because she felt it herself. She tells herself, it was timing, that's all. He thought it was time to settle down. And then to test out how it feels, she thinks, no, it's me, I'm special. I'm the One.



Jan comes over every Tuesday and Thursday while David teaches at the university. She started coming by after the accident. The first dressing changes were at the hospital, where they had special beds and basins and drugs to help manage the pain, as the doctors monitored for infection. David was the best at tending Clara's wounds, and after they realized this, he mostly took it over. But at first it was Patti and Jan, facing each other from either side of Clara's bed, scarcely able to find a place where their eyes could safely come to rest. The parts of Clara's body that hadn't burned in the fire had been harvested for skin that could be grafted. Her face remained intact, but her expression was so weary and enduring that Patti felt it as a reproach.

You show too much, David told Patti. She looks at you and knows to be upset.

When David bathed Clara, or rubbed cream on her dry, grafted skin to keep it moist, Clara only cried silently, holding back the plaintive whine that came out under Patti's touch.

My brave girl, he said. My precious girl.

While Patti divides the kids' clothing into boxes according to seasons, Jan begins packing the books. Between them, David and Patti have seven tall bookcases, all full, the shelves double-stacked and teeming. Jan moves from one bookcase to the next, sealing and labeling according to Patti's instructions.

She says, you've got some doubles here between the collections. Maybe it's time to pare down. Do you need two copies of *As I Lay Dying*?

I'd rather not, says Patti. Her hands smooth the wrinkles out of Ryan's woolen pants. Jan shrugs.

I guess you'll have room at the new place for more bookcases, says Jan. But these copies are identical. Same edition, same everything. She fits both books into the top of a box, closing the flap with her knee as she bends to tape it shut.

You just never know, Patti says, and Jan looks at her.

What don't you know? asks Jan. After a silence, she says, I suppose not.

They are interrupted by the phone ringing. When Patti returns, Jan smiles, eyes questioning.

David?

Patti shakes her head. Hang-up, she says.

Patti begins sorting the clothes at a faster clip, packing items in only an approximation of folding. When she finds two of David's shirts mixed in with Ryan's things, Patti tosses them to the centre of the room, away from her other piles. They balloon out then deflate on descent, tasteful olive green and blue slate puddles on the hardwood floor, plastic buttons clicking like landing gear as they make contact.

David should be home by now, she says. Her irritation casts the tone of her voice, and a pucker stops up Jan's lips. Patti knows David is the magnet that pulled Jan east after a lifetime on the prairies. The favourite.

He's probably working late, says Jan. Her short, grey ponytail swings as she nods. He's a hard worker. You know, when Jack died, he took care of everything, even the farm for half a year.

I know. You're right.

He's a good man, says Jan.

Yes, says Patti.



She thinks of Clara's large scar as seaweed. It has that kind of shape, aquatic fronds, rounded fingers of raspberry skin clasping her daughter's arms and shoulders, a shrug of mottled pink and cream across the top of her back. Patti sometimes imagines it as a shadow cast by sunlight filtered through shallow, reedy water, kelp waving in gentle tides behind Clara, who is wading or maybe scuba-diving, turned away to face the ocean.

David has a scar, too. It cleaves his upper lip, a mean kind of rift on the right-hand side, a suggestion of latent strength and violence. The product of a bar brawl he stumbled into during his twenties on a trip around Britain. The scar tells a lie, Patti knows, for David is a peaceable man, not cruel, attentive to the force of his body. But after all she suspects it is only half a lie, that in the two decades David has lived with it, the scar has wrought its own adjustments as he groped his way into becoming the man it implied, accepting its quiet prospects and restrictions.

On one of their first dates, Patti traced the scar with her finger as they lay naked across his unmade bed. She shuddered to think of his mouth cut open, his beautiful face gaped and bleeding like a fish on a lure.

You like my scar, David said. He had his arms crossed behind his head, neck resting on his wrists.

Only the very sexiest women like my scar.

He was talking in the staccato drawl he used for flirting, his prairie hick talk, eyes looking solemn, but something else, maybe the very curl in his lip where the scar tugged it upwards, making his words come out ironic.

Uh-huh, said Patti. I bet.

Patti has only a scar on her wrist, one round pink dot the size of a pencil eraser, from a chicken pox pock she couldn't resist picking. Before Clara was born, David used to say he wondered how she managed to float through life so unscathed.

Don't know, she said. Lucky, I guess.

Later, but before the accident, he pointed to her stretch marks. He said, I did that. Or at least I helped.



Patti relives the fire over and over. The smell of trout driving her from the kitchen. She will always despise fish.

Maybe it is because pregnancy was already like getting sea legs, the feeling of grasping after a new centre of gravity, but the smell of the fish is like brine and blood choking her throat. Like the feeling of her tongue on an oxidized chain, an anchor being dragged up out of her belly, dark orange and furred with barnacles. Saline and foam in her mouth turning to bile. Patti runs to the bathroom, so close to the kitchen that the sinks share a drain. The kitchen sink is full of two largish pots soaking clean. She leaves open the bathroom door and the children as they are, Ryan colouring at the kitchen table, chattering to Clara, who sits in the playpen near the back door. Hurrying to the toilet, she lowers herself to her knees and takes a moment, maybe ten seconds, to use both hands to hold back the loose front curls of dark red hair from where they hang about her face. This day is the day that Patti is late to start supper because she has wasted an hour trying to get pretty, darting in and out of the bedroom to struggle into clothes that don't fit, swiping at hair that has fallen limp in the humidity. When she realizes the time, she makes fast work of dinner, putting on rice and green beans and chocolate pudding. Three out of four burners. Trout in the oven.

As she vomits, she thinks, it was all for nothing. She will be clammy and pale when he gets home. Too dejected to feel sexy.

It is a strange, shrill cry that she hears, vaguely feline, and for a disorienting moment, Patti thinks it is the baby inside her.

She reaches the kitchen just as Ryan is setting Clara down on the floor, yelping as he backs away. It takes Patti a moment to see the flames

at Clara's wrist and only a second later they are running across Clara's back and into her hair and everything about Clara is changing colour before her eyes. Patti grabs the biggest pot soaking in the sink and throws the water over her daughter, and then again with the second pot before pushing her to the floor, covering her with her body and rolling with her. She is screaming no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Clara screams, too, but not in words.

The story, as far as it can be reconstructed from Ryan's terrified retelling, is that Clara wanted to taste the pudding. Sometimes Patti used to offer Ryan a lick off her spoon as she stirred a dessert, heating it slowly on the stove.

It starts with Ryan finding Clara her baby spoon and heaving her up toward the stovetop. Like David, he has always been strong. As Clara aims for the pudding pot, the sleeve of her nightgown droops down into the gas flame.

David says, it's not your fault. Rocking her like a baby. He tells her, I don't blame you. Don't blame yourself. It was an accident. He puts his hand in her hair and rubs her scalp.

Patti cries and cries. She hates crying because she looks ugly. She is shocked that this awareness hasn't left her, even at such a moment. She says, I hate myself.

David says, I love you.



Patti used to think, this is living. This is what life is made of. This while drinking wine in the park, or going out for dinner with her last twenty dollars, eating spicy noodles until her nose ran clear, eyes streaming. Riding the night bus to New York City for a free rock show. Making love, even before she quite figured out how to enjoy it. These were the important things, the ones worth sacrificing for. The way to make memories. The way to feel.

Then came a time when she told herself this about pregnancy, the quickening, labour itself, the matchless feeling of suckling her babies at her breast. Now as she goes from room to room, gathering an unwholesome harvest of dirty clothes, she wonders what generative force has worked this transformation, skewed her ranking of values until they seem as though they might belong to somebody else.

She thinks, I'd like to go back.

It was something about Ryan turning up, rousing in her a kind of vying covetousness. When she'd hinted, David had only hummed.

I guess you want me to give you a baby, he said with his hick twang. He kissed her hard, reaching up under her shirt, pressing himself against her as though willing to undertake it right then.

Sometimes she tries to distance herself from the woman who birthed them, the swollen woman who wept with anxiety, wore sweatpants, lined their bedrooms with wallpaper trim in patterns of bunnies or spaceships. From the kind of woman who ever thought to care about trim.

Under her feet, she can feel the Levis David sloughed off the night before. He sometimes undresses in the laundry room, a perfect instance of the concision of his nature. Preternaturally succinct in all things, shockingly so, she thinks, for a man of letters, but what does she know. Before tossing them into the wash, she fishes through the pockets and finds his wedding band, a cool circle of white gold. She holds it in her hand for a moment before placing it on the shelf above the washer. After a moment, she changes her mind and brings it to the bedroom, setting it down on his bedside table where she has seen him put it at night.

She sets about collecting the next load of laundry, mostly the loose, cotton items she buys for Clara, the recommended clothing for burn victims. It is still important to keep her skin safe from the sun. As she sorts her daughter's clothes into the basket, Patti thinks of Clara's grafts, how the doctors took from one part of her to heal another. But the places that hurt Clara the most throughout everything were those parts that they cut away, the good bits of skin from her bottom and from her thighs that would grow again on their own, without leaving any marks. The good parts that were turned into something else, into the raspberry stains they hope will fade. And Patti considers this and thinks that there is no trace left now of who she herself used to be before, the parts of her made over into this married woman with kids. The only one who shows.



The last night in the old house David takes the kids over to Jan's at seven o'clock. They are celebrating. David had an idea of making dinner for Paul and his wife, one of Patti's fancy desserts and his meditative pea risotto, but Patti pointed out that their pots and dishes have been packed, the house a waiting reliquary of boxes, so they are going to an Italian restaurant downtown.

For some reason, everyone orders osso buco, even Patti, who is usually turned off by the sight of bone protruding from her meal. She is distracted, floating just above the flow of the conversation. David and Paul play at a

hearty dispute over who is to buy the wine, and they end up getting two bottles, both red.

David says, it looks like it's going to be that kind of night.

Paul says, good Lord, don't you have to get up early for the movers?

They all laugh. Patti thinks, it looks like it's going to be that kind of night. Endless goodwill and merriment. She gulps at her wine, anxious about her own unease.

We'll be neighbours now, says Paul. We'll be borrowing sugar right and left.

Do you like babysitting? asks Patti. Paul says, sure, but Patti sees him shoot a nervous look first at David, who shakes his head, then at his wife, who only smiles.

She looks at Paul's wife, Jessica, and thinks that she is beautiful. She is seated across from David, as Patti sits opposite Paul. She has long, black hair and an exotic mouth glossed to a dark pink. Patti drops her fork on purpose to check that no-one's legs are touching.

You'll have to get a new one, says David, giving her a close look. His voice, to Patti, sounds reproving. She shrugs.

When the wine comes, David fills everyone's glasses and suggests a round of toasts.

To the future, says Jessica.

To freedom, says David.

To justice, says Paul.

To love, Patti says.

As Patti clinks everyone's glasses, taking a moment to lock eyes according to the new adage, she scans for guilt or betrayal. And in everyone's gaze, every flicker of light and moisture in the eye, she sees only bluster, and perhaps kindness, and a trace of something like her own helpless puzzlement staring back.

