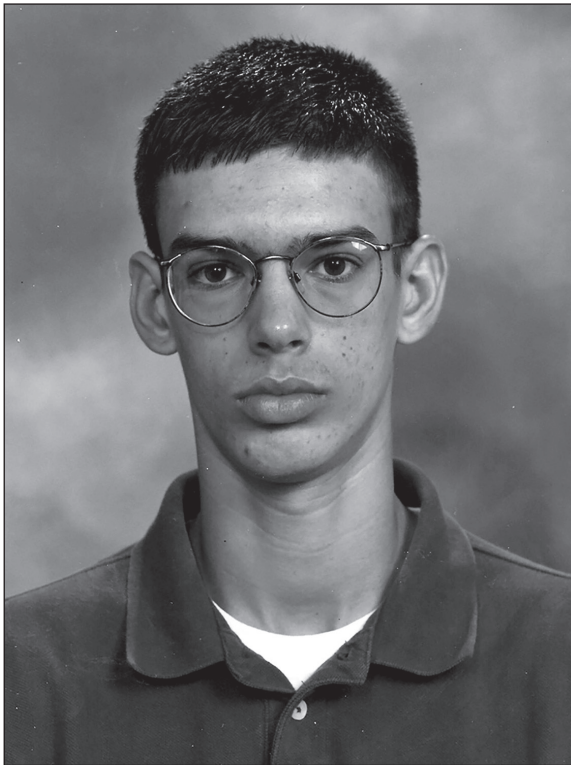


CHAPTER 11

SCARFACE



The young face of a boy going into high school with a goal of being accepted to a military academy. Spring 1998.

On the Monday before spring break, all the students at Conway High School filed into the auditorium for a mandatory assembly. They did the same one every year: some variation of an anti-drinking, anti-drug campaign meant to scare students from getting drunk or high over the break.

My buddies and I were distracted and loopy being this close to a week's worth of freedom. As far as we were concerned, this assembly was just one more hour to kill until Friday afternoon when we could race out the big, brick building into the sunshine. I think most students were like that—everyone kept talking and laughing, even after the teachers turned out the lights and angrily shushed us.

A video was projected onto the large screen at the front of the auditorium. Slowly, a narrative unfolded. A girl's voice began describing her spring break trip to Florida with her friends while a series of pictures appeared on the screen. First, a picture of three girls next to a car packed up with gear. Then, a picture of them on the beach in their bikinis. A picture of them at a restaurant, sipping cokes through straws, looking sunburned. My friends and I were only half paying attention—less focused on the story than the cute girls in the bikinis.

"We got invited to a party by some guys we met on the beach..." The girl's voice continued narrating. New pictures appeared: the girls dressed in tube tops and tight jeans, holding drinks in a crowd of party-goers, looking drunk. Someone in the audience whooped and called out, "Hell, yeah!"

"We were having such a great time, but then we had to get back to our hotel... My friend thought she was okay to drive..."

We knew the end of the story: we'd heard it every year. They drove drunk and got in an accident, and someone probably got hurt—blah, blah, blah.

Suddenly, the video switched from the pictures of the cute girls in their party attire to the narrator talking on camera. The entire audience gasped. The distracted chattering was replaced with a stunned silence.

The girl was completely mutilated. The car had caught on fire in the accident, she explained. She'd been badly burned. Her face was horribly disfigured and grotesque.

"Damn!" one of my friends hissed.

"She looks like a monster," I heard a freshman whisper. A guy near me muttered a crass joke; a girl beside him hissed a rebuke. The girl looked like she was near tears.

After the video, the principal got on stage and lamely repeated the main message: don't be stupid. Don't drink and drive. Don't do drugs or party over spring break. As soon as the bell rang, we all bolted out of the auditorium, eager to get out of there and put distance between ourselves and that awful face.

But it followed me. Every time I went into the bathroom for the rest of that week, I saw that girl's face on the posters that had been hung up by the school staff. The posters were simple: they featured a portrait of the severely disfigured girl next to the stark warning: *Don't drink and drive.*

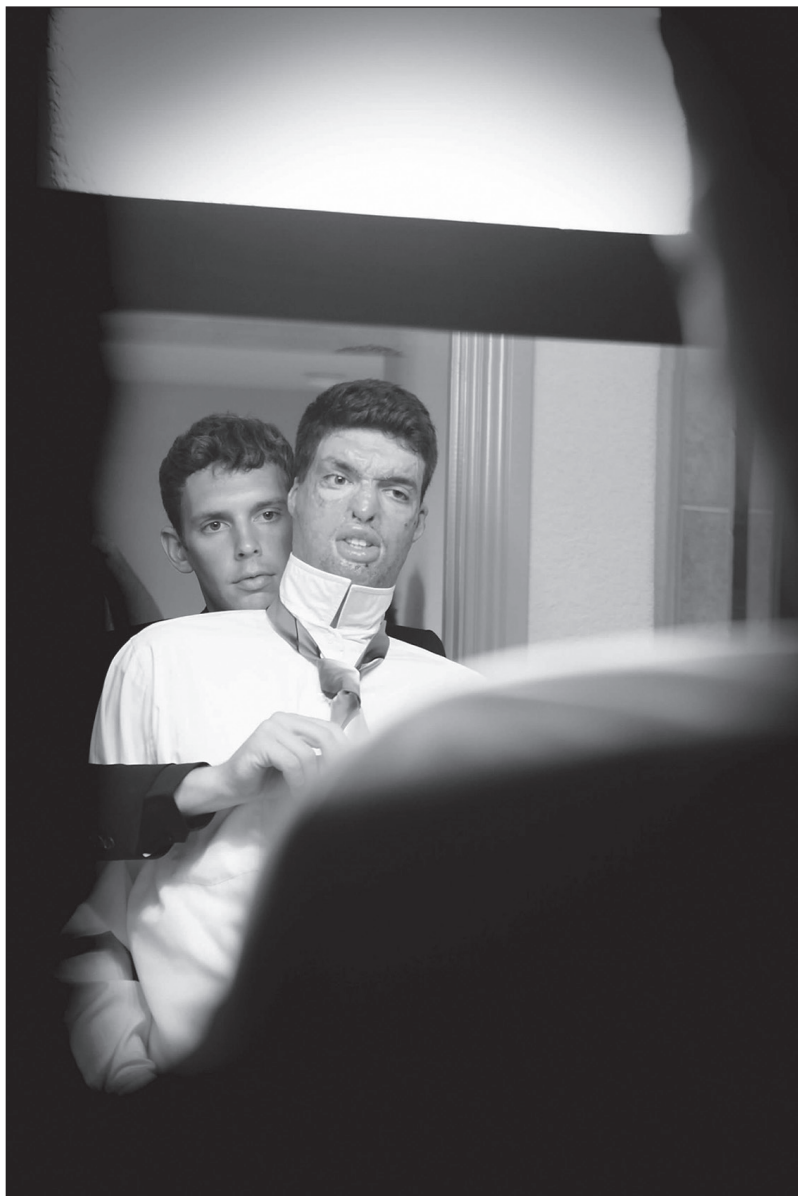
My stomach turned every time I looked at her. The permanence of her injuries was horrifying, especially considering how cute and normal she'd looked before. *How terrible to lose your identity like that*, I thought. *Not just to be changed, but to look monstrous.* I washed my hands at the sink and tore my eyes from the poster in the reflected mirror, focusing instead on my own face. *I'd rather die than go through life, looking like that*, I concluded. *If I were in her shoes, I think I'd kill myself.*

It wasn't something I dwelled on for days or hours at a time; it was just a passing contemplation whenever I spotted the poster, easy enough to walk away from.

I was glad it hadn't happened to me.

I assumed it never would.

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS. MAY 2009.



With Daniel, my best man, the afternoon of my wedding with Amy. May 2009.

On the morning of the wedding, I stood in the bathroom of my friend's house where the ceremony would take place. Daniel was with me, ready to serve as my best man. I held out my tie to him. I was still having trouble manipulating things with my hands.

Wordlessly, Daniel accepted the tie and gestured for me to turn toward the mirror and squat down a bit. Standing behind me and peering into the mirror, he wrapped his arms around my shoulders and tied the tie. His motions were deft. His face, appearing next to mine, was handsome and smooth.

I stared in the mirror at myself: the groom. My facial scarring had been trending in a bad direction. After my first date with Amy, I'd had the hope that my face would start to go through its own little healing process—that the scar tissue might become harder to see, and more pliable. It worked that way for some guys. Instead, every day it seemed like the scarring was getting worse.

"There," Daniel said, giving the tie a final tug. "Ready for the bride."

At the moment, I was thinking more about the rest of the Larsens. "Did you know that was the first time I met Amy's parents?" I said to Daniel.

"You mean this morning? At breakfast?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

Daniel shook his head in disbelief. "You think you made a good first impression?"

I tried to smile. "Well. I don't think I look anything like her other boyfriends."

Daniel chuckled. Only because I knew him so well, I could hear the trace of bitterness in it. I don't think he'd gotten used to my scars yet. "Seriously though—you think her parents liked you?"

I considered my interactions with Amy's family over breakfast. "They played along well. Amy says I should be thankful they're mid-westerners, because they don't know how to be anything other than polite." Daniel laughed again. "But in private, her mom asked her if she was pregnant."

He locked eyes with me. "Is she?"

“No. I think her mom thought that was the only reason Amy would marry someone like me.” I paused. “I don’t think they expect us to stay married.”

“Oh,” Daniel said. “Well. You just gotta prove them wrong.”

I looked back in the mirror at myself. “Beauty and the Beast.”

Daniel stood beside me and put his arm around my shoulders, staring at my reflection in the mirror. “Hey. Don’t knock the Beast. Remember? He’s a prince underneath.” He patted my chest. “Amy’s getting the best guy there is.”

The ceremony went off without a hitch. Both of us felt relaxed—we had only a small number of guests, and Warren’s presence put us both at ease. During the meal afterwards, Mother pulled her Bible out of her purse and cleared her throat.

Daniel tapped his fork on his glass. “Listen up! Mother of the groom has something to say.”

“This is from Genesis chapter two,” Mother announced. She adjusted her glasses. “*The Lord God made a woman from the rib, and he brought her to the man. Then, ‘At last!’ the man exclaimed. ‘This one is bone from my bone and flesh from my flesh. She will be called “woman” because she was taken from “man.”’ This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.*”

Mother looked up from the Bible and made eye contact with Amy. “Amy. I’m so thankful you’ve been able to see Samuel for the man that he is. I want to welcome you to the family. You and Samuel are united as one now.” I squeezed Amy’s hand under the table. “May our good Lord bless you both.”



Our wedding—an answer to prayer and the end of my fear that I'd never have a family. Warren Haggray is in the background. May 2009.

In our wedding pictures from that day, Amy is radiant in her white dress. Her smooth, dark hair frames her face underneath her white veil. She looks at me with her bright smile and sparkling eyes—the man of her dreams. How? Her love for me must have been impossible for anyone to understand who only saw our picture. My face looks like somebody took a blowtorch to a wax figure and got it all distorted, then let it solidify in place. My lips and mouth are so swollen that it's hard to tell if I'm even smiling. (I was—or trying to.) The only normal part of my face is the peach-colored crescent moon underneath my left eye where a skin graft had successfully taken.

But thank God, Amy saw past that. She saw me for who I was—the man I was trying to be.

Neither of us had any idea what my face would end up looking like. It might get much worse. Or—over a long series of facial surgeries—it might eventually look something closer to normal, a Frankenstein's monster assemblage of skin patches.

We knew we were committing to a life together, for better or worse. But Amy had elected to marry someone who needed intense care, right from the start—and “worse” was coming at us, hot.

* * *

Some aspects of newlywed life looked perfectly normal. We moved into Amy's house, which she'd bought just a year earlier, fifteen minutes east of Brooke Army Medical Center. We went for morning runs together. After establishing that we were both dog people during our brief dating period, we adopted a Belgian Malinois for me to befriend Amy's dog. We did dinner once a week with our good friends, George and Sharon. We ate out a lot and went to church on Sundays.

Other parts of newlywed life looked completely bizarre. Like—Hannibal Lecter, bizarre. With my facial disfigurement growing steadily worse, the doctors and therapists decided I should wear a clear plastic mask to put pressure on the scar tissue. They scanned my face then made a specialized mold for the mask, but even so, it

was horribly uncomfortable. And it was just *weird*. I already looked completely disfigured, and then I had to wear a freakish mask for twelve hours a day? Forget about scaring small children; this mask would give *me* nightmares.

One Saturday afternoon, about a month into being married, Amy hurried to the door after someone rang the doorbell. "Get excited, Sam," she said. "We've got visitors!"

"What? Who? Should I take off my mask?" It was too late. She'd already opened the door.

Anthony Roszko and two other guys from our platoon waited on the stoop. Their deployment had ended. They were back.

I called out his name and hurried to the door as they entered in. I leaned over and gave him a hug, patting his back. Anthony limply patted mine. When I pulled away, he looked stunned.

That stupid mask. "Here, let me take this off," I said. "It's creepy." I pulled the mask off. "That's better. Way more comfortable too. It's so good to see you!"

Anthony's eyes darted away but he smiled tightly. "Good to see you, man."

Amy—either oblivious to Anthony's reaction or all too aware of it—ran interference. "Sit down, you guys! Let me grab some drinks."

Anthony sat down awkwardly on the couch, avoiding my eyes. He looked around the small living room. "This is a great place you have."

"Yeah, Amy bought this place. It's everything we need." We bantered about the house, the yard, the neighborhood—small talk. I asked them about the rest of their deployment; that kept us going for a while.

At one point, Anthony excused himself, holding up his phone. "It's my brother, gotta take this." I hadn't heard the phone ring.

I watched him pace in our front yard, in front of the large living room window. He talked rapidly into the phone and seemed agitated. After about thirty minutes, he came back into the house. He still avoided looking at me, other than quick glances.

"I'm sorry it never worked out for me to return to you guys," I said. "That was my goal for the first few months in the hospital. I was so

determined to get well fast enough that I could redeploy with our platoon.”

He nodded stiffly. “Yeah, I remember you saying that on the phone. You told us how well you were doing.”

“I’m still hoping to go back as an Infantry Officer. That’s my goal for healing now.”

Anthony nodded again, silently. “Your will has always been really strong, Sam. I’m proud of you for having the will to keep going.”

“Thanks, man.”

He glanced at my face. “Do they...you mentioned something about facial reconstruction? How much recovery and surgery is left?”

“A little bit—” I began.

Amy interrupted me. “Quite a lot. But we’ll take the surgeries one at a time. It will be a while before it’s done. Maybe another year or two.”

“Not that long,” I amended. “I’m a quick healer.” I tried to smile.

“Yeah.” He glanced at me then looked away again. “You always told us on the phone how well you were doing.” It was a point he seemed fixated on.

They left after an hour. Amy studied me. “You don’t seem as excited as I expected you’d be, after seeing those guys.”

I stared out the window at Anthony’s retreating car. In Afghanistan, we’d joked around like brothers. He’d known my mind almost better than anyone besides Steven. Why had he been so weird? And why had he taken that thirty-minute phone call when they only had an hour to visit?

And why didn’t he look at me? I thought, knowing the answer. I stared down at the mask in my hand. This mask was supposed to help me, but my scar tissue was too much—it didn’t seem to be doing any good. I looked back out the window. Anthony’s car was gone.

That afternoon, I shoved the mask in the back of the bathroom cupboard where we kept other first aid supplies. I didn’t plan to wear it again. What was the point?

I banked on the surgeries instead. A new surgery was scheduled

for every four weeks, and life became oriented around the surgeries' imposed rhythms. The week leading up to the surgery involved several prep appointments. Amy chose to come to them all, lining up her work lunch break with whatever time the appointment was scheduled, then heading back to work as soon as it ended. While she worked, I continued my full-time routine of physical and occupational therapy appointments.

On the day of surgery, I went in at 5:00 a.m. Amy drove in with me to keep me company until they took me back to the operating room, then she'd head to work until she got news I was done. I usually had to stay at the hospital for a few days afterwards, which meant Amy visited me early, went to work, raced home after work to let the dogs out, came back to the hospital, and stayed with me until 9:00 p.m. when visiting hours were over. At that point, she'd head home, crash into bed, and wake up at 5:00 a.m. the next morning to start her routine all over again.

Amy's work demands were exacerbated by the fact that the ICU dietitian she worked with had taken a long stretch of leave. Her work hours weren't just longer; they were also more demanding as Amy had to help carry the load of her absent colleague in addition to her own full schedule—bouncing back and forth between the ICU, the step-down unit, and outpatient rehab. When Amy first asked her supervisor for time off during one of my surgeries, she was given a hard no.

She told me about the conversation later, at home. "There was just *no* flexibility or understanding from her. Her attitude was like, 'Well, you knew what you were getting into when you married him. This is your life now, so good luck. You've still got to get all your work done.'"

I swallowed hard and tried not to let those words sink in: *This is your life now, so good luck*. "What did you say?"

"What *could* I say?" She sighed hard. "I just have to get all my work done."

In retrospect, I should have been more sensitive to Amy's burnout. I had gotten so used to the life and routine of an Infantry Officer, I didn't often stop to consider how exhausting Amy's schedule was.

Since I'd enrolled at West Point, life had consisted of getting up at 5:00 a.m. and working hard all day. There *was* no life outside of military duties and the mission at hand. The mission at hand in this season was to grind through this series of surgeries and rehab and therapies. Amy was a Lieutenant; she knew the drill. As she said once to me, "It is what it is. We just have to trust the process."

That's right: we just had to trust the process and keep going—that was our shared mission.

It didn't occur to me that most new brides imagine married life will look different than boot camp.

To Amy's infinite credit, she never complained about the demands of my care. One night, we were in the bathroom, going through the lengthy wound care routine that defined the weeks, post-surgery. While it wasn't the hours-long process that Mother and I had endured together, it was still an ordeal.

"Do you ever get tired of this?" I asked one evening in the bathroom, while Amy carefully dabbed a special cream over the fresh grafts on my chin.

"Are you kidding me? The wound care is one of my favorite parts." She pulled back and looked at me, giving me one of her bright smiles.

"What?" I asked, incredulous. "Why?"

She shrugged and went back to her dabbing. "It just feels like a sweet moment between you and me. I like being able to take care of you in a way that no one else can. Our friends can have us over for conversation, and we can always go out for a meal. But this is something you legitimately need help with, and I like being the one to meet that need."

But even if Amy refused to complain about being my full-time caregiver, the strain on her began to show itself in other ways. One night, we were eating sushi rolls together from our normal sushi joint. As usual, they'd obliged with our request to cut my rolls into very, very thin pieces that I could fit into my mouth.

"I almost lost it on that visiting professor today," she said, her mouth full of Spicy Tuna roll.

“The infection control doctor? Why? I thought he was a big deal.”

“He *is* a big deal, and he knows it,” she vented. “After his lecture this morning, he came to the burn unit to do rounds with us and kept stopping to teach. We were doing rounds for close to *three* hours, standing the whole time...” I winced. I knew how hard Amy had been working to complete her rounds efficiently to get all her work done. Three hours was twice as long as it would have normally taken her. “And so I was drinking *water*. Imagine that—I’m standing on my feet in the hot burn unit for three hours and I have the audacity to drink water.”

“That was audacious?”

“Apparently, yes! Because he made some snide comment about me drinking an open water container and how inappropriate that was because it could ‘release spores.’ I almost lost it on him.”

That surprised me. Amy knew how to handle difficult people. She was a pro at navigating all sorts of difficult moods among the patients and stressed-out providers on the burn unit. Something like this wouldn’t normally rattle her.

“I mean, I didn’t *actually* lose it. I just looked at him with eye daggers. Then Dr. Renz made a joke that diffused the situation and we moved on. That was probably a good thing, because otherwise, I might have gone over and slapped that guy.”

She lapsed into sudden silence. I took another careful bite of sushi, and studied my wife. What did her expression mean? I hadn’t learned the nuances of her moods yet.

Amy pushed her hands through her hair and laughed. “My fuse is so short right now. I’m so stressed out.”

I nodded. I didn’t know what to say.

There wasn’t a lot of downtime for us that summer. It was just work, rehab, recovery, surgery, repeat. But we had an end goal: in September, we’d go on the honeymoon.

We’d delayed the honeymoon on purpose. When we got married in May, I wasn’t “travel ready.” Doing a month of convalescent leave at my parents’ home in Virginia had been hard enough, and that was

with Mother helping me as a trained caregiver, doing physical therapy every day, and relying on specialized shipments of supplements. (Thanks, Amy.) A honeymoon cruise was a serious step up, and we both knew I wasn't ready to go off my hospital leash—even with a skilled medical provider as my wife. We decided to do the honeymoon when we'd originally planned to do the wedding: in September, when I'd hopefully be in stronger shape after a summer's worth of intense surgeries and rehab.

But then those plans changed too.

One evening post-surgery, Amy and I sat in my hospital room. She was catching me up on her day. I was still loopy on pain meds but doing my best to pay attention.

"So, I heard something kind of weird today. Well—I don't know if it's 'weird.' Interesting, maybe. I mean, more *concerning* than anything else."

"What?" I asked.

"Another dietitian I once took a class with has been on deployment in Iraq. But apparently, she expressed some suicidal ideation and they're taking it very seriously. They packed her up and sent her back stateside. She's done with the deployment."

I wasn't sure why Amy found this so especially weird or interesting. Mental health issues were not unusual during deployments. My thoughts struggled to make connections through the fog of the pain meds. "Did you know her well?"

"No. Barely at all. But Sam—there aren't many dietitians in the Army."

I nodded and waited. "You're very special?" I suggested, still looking for the thread.

"*Sam.*" She laughed impatiently, then became serious. "The Army can't plan for such a sudden vacancy. They're going to need to pull a replacement dietitian from one of the big medical centers, and it could only be this one, or Walter Reed."

Slowly, I began to realize what Amy was communicating. "You think it will be you?"

"I'm the lowest ranking and the most expendable, at either facility. So, yes." She sighed. "We might need to prepare...for me to deploy."

A deployment? I had been so obsessed with getting myself re-deployed, I hadn't thought about the Army calling upon my very capable wife. I felt a mixture of excitement for her, jealousy, fear, and dread. Could I manage without Amy?

She must have been thinking the same thing. "I could try to fight it, if it comes down like that," she said without much conviction. "I could explain that I'm needed here, as your caregiver."

I didn't like the sound of that. I wasn't *completely* helpless. Far be it from me to hold Amy back from the call of duty—even if I really, really didn't want her to go. "I could manage," I said, not fully convinced. "I've been leaning on you as a crutch, a little bit. This would force me to be more independent."

Amy nodded, ready to agree. "In some ways, this might be better in the long run," she suggested. "I'd be joining the deployment halfway into its duration, so I'd be gone for less time than if it was a full one."

I nodded, thinking about what her absence would mean for me. *No honeymoon. No surgeries until she got back. No Amy.*

I shrugged. "It hasn't happened yet. Let's just wait and see what they do."

"Good call," she agreed. She looked at her watch. "It's nearly nine. I should go."

* * *

Within two weeks, Amy was called into her OIC's office (officer in charge). They gave her the news she was expecting: in a matter of days, she'd deploy to Iraq.

She told me the news during her lunch break. Her voice was energized; her eyes sparkled. "I know this is a huge change of plans," she acknowledged, "but it's also a big opportunity for me."

It didn't occur to me that an Iraq deployment might seem like less work and more fun than the grind Amy had been currently experi-

encing. All I could think about was months on end without her. But I tried to shove that disappointment under pragmatic considerations and a focus on duty.

That night over dinner, I tried to rally myself for the prospect, going over the same rationale Amy had already provided. “I don’t even know if we *have* a veto power. But I’m not sure it’s worth trying to exercise it, even if we do. You’re probably going to have to deploy at some point. If you can do it now, it will be shorter than later.”

She nodded. “We’ll reschedule the honeymoon. And I spoke with your doctors today. They said we’ll have to pause the facial reconstruction surgeries, but you’ll still be able to do surgeries on your arms and hands.”

Pause the facial reconstruction surgeries. I tried not to think about what that might mean for my appearance. Would the hypertrophic scarring continue to build up tissue while Amy was gone? Would I look even worse by the time she got home?

“Six months,” she said. “Mid-September to late March. It sounds like a long time, but it will go fast.” She looked at me apologetically. “I’ll miss you.”

I’ll miss you too, I wanted to say, but the obviousness of this fact was too painful to say aloud. Amy had been the best thing to happen to me—not just since the accident, but ever. She had quickly become my best friend, and her companionship was the best part of every day. Beyond the emotional ties, Amy and I both knew my healing couldn’t move forward without a carepartner. Mother couldn’t sub in. She had put in her dues already—and besides, she was needed at home in Virginia.

It was time for me to start functioning independently, even if that meant dealing with the current version of my face for another six months.

“I love you,” I said. “And I’ll be fine. I’ll focus on rehab. This will be really good for your military career. And who knows, you might even have a good time.”

She nodded, her eyes shining. “I hope so.”

With Amy gone, my healing progress entered into a holding pattern. The therapy and rehab continued, but the surgeries essentially stopped. I might have had one minor one on my hand. That was as much as could be managed without someone at home helping me with wound care, post-surgery.

I hung out with the dogs. I visited with friends. I went running. I headed to Virginia to spend the holidays with my family again.

Finally, in February—a month early—she was back. *Amy*.

Her eyes still sparkled, but her smile was a bit less bright, like someone had turned down the dimmer one notch. Just two weeks before Amy's deployment ended, a rocket landed fifteen feet away from her. Although it didn't detonate—if it had, she would have died—it still sent a shower of shrapnel flying through the vicinity which shredded two container housing units used as latrines. Amy happened to be in the bathroom at the time, and her stall was the single place in a wide radius that the shrapnel didn't penetrate. She was the only person there who walked away with no external wounds.

"I know it was God," she told me, clearly shaken with the memory. "The Lord put His hands around my little bathroom stall and just protected me. But I was so stunned by the whole incident. I felt like I was in a daze. The other women in there were all wounded. I was the first one to see them and try to treat them until others arrived."

The experience had shaken her up. I was so glad to have her home, even if she was a different person than the woman who'd left. We started getting to know each other again.

And we finally booked a honeymoon.

Hawaii in April, we'd decided. Hawaii was a popular honeymoon destination—surely, that meant we'd have a good time. We didn't fully think through what tropical sunshine would mean for my fragile, scarred skin, nor did we really have a sense of what we liked to do on vacations together.

But—we couldn't go wrong with Hawaii. Right?

Instead of Hawaiian shirts, I wore long sleeves and a goofy sunhat everywhere I went—even into the water. One of the first experiences we booked was snorkeling in Oahu’s Hanauma Bay. The brochure had made it an easy sell—a *natural, protected area...stunning coral reefs...one of the top snorkeling destinations in the world*. We bought snorkels and masks and little fins.

Amy splashed off into the bay. She paused and turned around, waiting for me to join her. I waved her ahead. “You go!”

I stared at my snorkel. How was I going to get this thing in my tiny mouth? I tried shoving it past my swollen lips and put my face in the water. Instantly, my mouth filled with the salty ocean. I couldn’t make a seal over the mouthpiece. I tried again, pushing the mouthpiece in farther and biting down with my teeth. I pushed off, willing my body to participate in this paradisaal experience. Once again, my mouth filled with water.

I pulled away the tube, frustrated. I could see Amy floating peacefully around thirty yards away. *Fine*, I thought. *I’ll just hold my breath and use the mask*. I stuck my head underwater. As soon as I needed to breathe, I had to kick my legs to pop my head up fully to get a decent breath. There was no way to peacefully float and admire the coral or the fishes—I had to keep going vertical again to get my head out of the water. My pathetic floating was exacerbated by the fact that I had almost no body fat to help keep my six feet, four inches worth of bones buoyant. I kept sinking down, then spluttering back up. No cute little clown fish or striking sea stars were sticking around for *that*.

For months, I’d oriented my focus on what I *could* do: the new gains I’d made, the activities I’d reclaimed, the *progress*. But here, in this Hawaiian paradise, on my honeymoon, wearing this stupid snorkel gear, I felt hit with my limitations.

Amy was drifting farther away. I knew I wasn’t going to be able to keep up. The frustration kept mounting. *This is just SNORKELING. It should be EASY*. I tried again, doing my best to take a deeper breath and plunging my mask into the water. Even as I did so, it occurred to me that my inhalation injuries most likely were inhibiting my lungs’ capacity to hold a breath. I stretched my body out in the water, willing

myself to float, willing myself to enjoy it. My tall, skinny body wasn't having it. My legs sank, my lungs gasped for air. I flailed and splashed.

Finally, I gave up. I swam back to the beach and sat in the sand.

Eventually, Amy joined me. "What's wrong? Did you not like it?"

"I just can't participate," I explained, hating the negative way I sounded. "The tube won't fit in my mouth, and I can't float."

Amy was sympathetic. "Do you want me to sit here with you?"

"No, you should enjoy it."

She protested for a while, and I protested back until she finally waded back into the water, glancing guiltily back at me. On the bus ride back to the hotel, Amy didn't tell me about the fish or the turtles she'd seen. She didn't describe the coral.

We just sat in silence.

In Kauai, we decided to try the pool instead. That felt lame. Here I was: with my gorgeous wife, on a beautiful island, with great beaches at an incredible resort, but I needed to limit myself to the pool. From the shallow end, I could see the beach and the ocean, just a stone's throw away. While Amy sunbathed poolside, I waded around in my long-sleeve rashguard, with my wide-brimmed sun hat.

I felt ridiculous.

A little kid began to approach me. He had his head down in the water, goggles on, and was splashing his legs while holding onto a kickboard. He swam closer, obviously not registering the man that was standing in the shallow end close by. Finally, an arm's distance away, he must have seen my feet. He popped his head out of the water, tugged his goggles off, and looked up.

He stared at me, eyes wide, jaw dropped—an expression of shock and horror. I wasn't surprised. I'd gotten used to this. But I wanted to somehow make myself seem less scary. I decided to try a joke.

"Make sure you wear sunscreen, kid," I said. "Otherwise, you could end up looking like this."

His eyes grew even wider. He turned around and started kicking furiously back to the other side of the pool. "Mom!" he yelled out. "MOM! I need more sunscreen!!"

That made me chuckle. I looked over at Amy to see if she'd followed the interaction. Her face was covered by a magazine, her brow covered by her hat.

We spent most of our two weeks driving around the islands, looking at pretty things, assuming that's how most couples enjoyed their Hawaiian honeymoons, and not really enjoying ourselves. Finally, we hit on an inspiration.

"Want to try a hike?" Amy asked me. "This one on the Nā Pali Coast is supposed to be beautiful."

A hike wouldn't involve stupid equipment or call attention to my limitations with sun exposure. And—thanks to my running habit—the one impressive thing I could do physically at that point was put one foot in front of the other. *I could hike.* "YES," I said. "Let's do a hike."

When we pulled into the parking lot, we were surprised to find many vacant spaces. The sign at the head of the trail informed us that the Nā Pali Coast experienced its own climate, and that the rainy season lasted from November to April. As if on cue, we heard a distant roll of thunder above us. Rain began to fall.

"You still game for this?" Amy asked.

"We are going to do this hike if it kills me."

"Let's do it!"

The trail shouldn't have been difficult, but the rain turned the path into clay-like mud which was incredibly slippery. Amy slid her hiking sandals forward like an ice skater. "I'm clay skating," she said.

The path curved up out of the trees and began skirting a high cliff. The ocean swirled far below us—at least a couple hundred feet. "No skating here," I cautioned.

"I can't believe there's no fence or guardrail or anything," Amy said, peering over the edge.

We made our way carefully along the cliff's rim, then began moving back downhill. By the time we made it to the beach, we felt enormous satisfaction with ourselves.

"We survived!" Amy crowed. She turned to me. "It's two more miles to the waterfall. Do you want to keep going?"

I didn't, but I wasn't about to admit it. "I'm game if you are."

"Really? You're not too cold?"

"I'm not too cold if you're not too cold." We studied each other, each trying to discern what the other's actual feelings were. "If you want to do it, let's do it," I said.

"You want to do it?" she asked.

I concluded she must want to go. I nodded. "Let's do it."

We made our way across a creek at the far end of the beach, balancing on stepping stones to get across, then picked up the trail as it wound back into a forest. The rain began to pour. We followed the trail to another creek crossing and managed to leap across it. I studied the creek. "Amy, look at how fast the water's rising from the rain."

She studied it. "Dang!"

The trail crossed the creek two more times as we wound our way along it to the waterfall. Each time, the crossing was more intense, the current stronger. Finally, we found the waterfall.

"It's great!" she called to me, over the roar of the falls mixed with the sound of the rain.

"It's amazing!" I agreed, shivering.

"Want to go back?" she yelled. I nodded, violently.

We made it to the first creek crossing. The creek was now raging, the water risen thigh high. Amy was alarmed. "Sam, I don't think we should try to cross."

"Let's try staying on this side of it," I suggested. "Maybe we can just follow the creek back to the trailhead without trying to cross over." Amy accepted my suggestion. That was unfortunate.

We got lost.

After thirty minutes of trying to find our way back to the trail and failing, we found ourselves edging along a fifty-foot drop off, looking down at the creek roaring with white water. "Careful," Amy urged. The thick vegetation pushed us right up against the edge.

"You know, I don't think this is a real trail at all," I said, trying to ignore my trepidation. "I think we're following a pig trail or a goat tra—"

Suddenly, I had the horrible sensation of no longer being connected to the ground, of no longer having control over my shape in the universe. Amy let out a sharp gasp. I was falling.

I landed right at the cliff's edge. My right leg swung off of it, dangling fifty feet above the rushing water. My left leg and butt had landed on the slippery mud of the trail. I felt Amy's hand grab my arm as I stared down into the roaring creek. She tugged me back. I scrambled away from the edge.

"We have *got* to find our way out of here," she burst out. "Is anyone else on this trail?!" she yelled. "Where is the trail?!"

We heard distant voices. "Oh my gosh, thank God!" Amy said. "Where are you?"

"Are you guys on the trail?" I called out.

Following their voices, we made it back to the original crossing. Several people stood on the other side. By holding hands with them and making a kind of bridge, Amy and I were able to get across the creek.

"You look like you've seen some gnarly action," one of the men yelled to me over the roar of the waterfall. "You think we'll make it back alive?" I couldn't tell if he was referring to my wounds or our fatigued, drenched-to-the-bone look after emerging from the forest back onto the trail.

"We'd better!" I yelled back. "I didn't survive being blown up just to drown in a river!"

In the company of our new friends, we managed to navigate two more creek crossings by locking arms together. Amy kept remarking how amazing and terrifying and sketchy the whole thing is. "What were you *thinking*?" she asked me, her tone a mixture of exhilaration and fear.

We finally made our way back to the beach where there was the fourth and final creek crossing. But this crossing—where all the force of the tributaries converged and plunged into the ocean—was by far the highest and most furious. A group of people, all of us soaking wet and shivering, had gathered at its bank. One by one, we saw couples and individuals try to cross it. There was no safe way. The rocky part where we'd crossed the first time was now covered with water, and

the rocks underneath made the water foam like rapids. *That* didn't look good. We watched several people try to cross there. They made it across, but barely, and we could see the force of the current as the water foamed furiously up to their midsection.

The other option was closer to the ocean, where the water widened across the softer banks of the beach and seemed to quiet down. Still, most people were opting for the higher crossing. Neither option looked good, but there was no other way to get around the creek; the beach was surrounded by cliffs on either side. The *only* way forward was through the water. Somehow, we had to get across to the trail if we hoped to make it back to the car.

We agreed to try the lower crossing, where the river widened and seemed to calm before meeting the ocean. Holding hands, we stepped in. Amy swore, and I immediately understood why: the combination of the ocean waves and the current from the river aggressively pulled the sand out from underneath our feet. We took another step, the water now up to our thighs, rain still pouring down. There was nothing firm to stand on. The ground we stood on was dissolving under our feet.

I took another step and suddenly was swept into the water. I heard Amy call my name and grip my hand. Frantically, I floundered, trying to get a purchase on something. My foot pushed against something—more shifting sand. I righted myself.

“Do NOT drown!” Amy yelled at me fiercely. “Let’s get *out* of here!”

Hurriedly, we pushed across the rest of the river and made it to the other side. We breathed a sigh of relief.

Amy shook her head. “If there was any doubt that God has a purpose for us, He’s answered that today. Because we both should have drowned and you should have plummeted to your death when you fell off that cliff. HOLY COW, Sam!”

“Let’s wait to celebrate until we’ve made it back to the car,” I said. “Two more miles to go.”

She shook her head again in disbelief.

We began making our way up the slippery trail. Our sandals were caked with mud and traction felt impossible. Both of us fell several times.

We reached the stretch along the cliff and looked at each other. “Don’t even think about cliff diving here, Sam,” Amy warned. Slowly, we began edging along the trail. I glanced over the cliff. The water below looked dark gray and angry. Waves smashed against the rock face hundreds of feet down. As the trail finally curved away from the cliff and back into the forest, both of us exhaled.

Thank God, the rest of the hike was nothing more than wet and slippery. We both cheered when we saw our rental car in the parking lot. We climbed in, dripping, muddy, and shivering. As we drove back to our hotel, the clouds above us cleared. We saw blue sky. A rainbow stretched from the rainy coast behind us in a glimmering bridge toward the sunny beaches we were driving toward. It was like the morning’s harrowing ordeal had never happened.

That night, at dinner—after hot showers, a long nap, and a fresh change of clothes—we recapped. Amy’s takeaway conclusion surprised me.

“Don’t think I’m crazy,” she said.

“Always a good way to begin a conversation,” I grinned.

“I think I might *love* hiking.”

“*What?*”

“I know!” she said, delighted. “We nearly died several times, and it was dangerous. But also, it was *beautiful*. The waterfall was really fun. I loved getting away from the city. And Sam—don’t you think it’s amazing that our bodies did that? Like—*your* body did that! You made it through all that rainy nastiness, eight miles round trip. I’m just so proud of you for not giving up and being willing to do adventurous activities with me!”

“Huh.” Amy was right. It *was* sort of incredible that we’d managed it. And when we’d been in the middle of it all, I wasn’t thinking about being a burn victim or being disfigured. We were just taking in beauty, working as a team, trying to help each other get back to the trailhead. In fact—when I considered the snorkeling, the pool, and the shopping—I had to admit the hike was shaping up to be the trip highlight so far. Now that we’d survived it.

“Let’s do more hikes when we get home,” I suggested. She nodded, satisfied.

* * *

With Amy’s deployment behind us and having successfully survived the honeymoon, the summer of 2010 found us settling back into life in San Antonio. It also became The Summer of My Face. “Time heals all wounds” was now officially a debunked cliché in my book. Time had not healed my wounds. Time had made my wounds much worse—big and red and bumpy and thick. I turned to the surgical approach instead.



Me, saluting the flag at a change of command ceremony, roughly sixteen months after the accident.

I knew facial reconstruction would be a massive undertaking—Amy and I both did. But the severity and disfiguration of my scars at that point seemed impossible to live with, long-term. The disfigurement wasn't just the kind of thing that made small children bolt for more sunscreen; it was impacting my ability to live and function productively in the world. It was a bizarre thing to commit to a process that would leave me, once again, unrecognizable, but facial reconstruction seemed like the only path forward. In that way, it wasn't unlike our Kauai hike: fording the river looked pretty unforgiving—but what else was there to do?

So, we plunged in.

The facial reconstruction involved cutting off the bumpy red scar tissue on my face and grafting on healthy skin over the top of my facial structure. That healthy skin was “harvested” from other parts of my body in one of two ways: a “partial thickness” graft involved skimming a thin layer of skin off the top of an unburned part of the body. In theory, that process would enable the graft site to scab and then heal with new healthy skin, enabling doctors to use that site multiple times.

“In theory.” That didn't work on my body, unfortunately. By the time we began my facial reconstruction, we had learned that my body reacted with hypertrophic scarring to any partial thickness grafts. Any little “skim off the top” slice produced new angry red tissue which became worse than useless; it became another site of badly scarred disfiguration.

That left us with Option 2: full-thickness grafts. With a full-thickness graft, you take out a section of skin at its full thickness: a nice skin steak. Then, doctors take the edges of the surrounding skin, pull them together, and sew it closed. That approach had worked better with my hypertrophic scarring reaction, but it had its limitations. Each site of a full-thickness graft could only be used once. That skin wasn't growing back. My body's few remaining sites of healthy, unburned, unscarred skin became extremely precious real estate.

In order to maximize the potential of these precious areas of healthy skin—and also because skin grafts naturally shrink after being removed—part of my pre-op for each surgery involved stretching out the donor skin ahead of time. This involved balloons and saline, which

sounds more fun than it actually was. During a preparatory surgery, the surgeon inserted a small rectangular bag underneath my skin at the donor site which was connected to a port. At weekly appointments, a doctor or PA would take a saline syringe and connect it to the port which they could feel through my skin. They pumped saline into the bag, gradually expanding the skin over time. This forced the skin to grow, making it easier to get a larger full-thickness graft with enough remaining stretch to stitch together the remaining skin.

During the surgery, the expanded skin was cut and harvested, then grafted onto my face in an area where they'd cut away the scar tissue. So long as the graft got proper blood flow and I got proper nutrition, the graft would take. If it didn't, the graft would eventually die: turning black and putting me in a position to have to start that graft process over.

The person leading this big facial adventure was Dr. Robert Spence. Dr. Spence normally worked at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore but traveled to San Antonio one week per month to do reconstructive surgeries on the burn patients at BAMC. In between the surgeries, he met with patients to consult about their upcoming surgeries and line up their surgical prep. That meant whenever Dr. Spence was in town, we were consulting about my next month's surgery—let's say, my upper lip—and then I'd go under the knife for whatever it was we'd discussed during the previous month's consult—let's say, my nose.

I felt lucky to be working with Dr. Spence. He was widely considered to be the best burn plastic surgeon in the world, and I was getting him toward the end of his career, when he had years of accumulated knowledge and skill. With him leading the charge, we'd end up replacing all of the skin from my eyes and ears, down to my neck.

We couldn't do it all in one surgery; we did it piece by piece, like assembling a puzzle. My upper lip was its own surgery. Then came my lower lip. My chin came next. Then my upper neck, below my jaw. Between each surgery, we were prepping the donor site: filling the little bags with saline, stretching the skin, praying it would take. The Summer of My Face turned into the Autumn of My Face and then on into winter. Every successful new graft was cause for celebration.

By the spring of 2011, we were gearing up for my cheeks. These presented a new challenge, due to their larger size. Dr. Spence broke down the approach in our pre-op consult.

"We're going to get more creative with this surgery," he said. "I'm concerned that there's a high risk of these larger grafts failing unless we maintain good blood flow. So, here's how I think we can accomplish that." He motioned toward my collarbone. "We're going to do the donor site here, at your clavicle. We'll really bloat and grow the skin there, but we're not going to sever all the veins. Instead, we're going to leave something called a pedicle attached—basically, a blood vessel that's still attached to its original site."

"How do we move the skin onto my cheek, then?" I asked.

"We're going to rotate it," he said.

"*What?*" Amy asked. "How will that work?"

He set his hand flat on my clavicle, with his thumb resting on my collarbone. "Imagine that my thumb is the pedicle and the rest of my hand is the graft. We take the skin—" Then he rotated his hand up toward my cheek, keeping his thumb connected to the bump of my collarbone. "But keep the pedicle connected to its blood source so the graft never loses good blood flow. After about a week, the graft will start to take to the site and begin producing its own blood, at which point we can sever the pedicle."

"How long will the prep take?" Amy asked.

"It will be a two-month process. And we'll try to do both cheeks at the same time."

The night before the surgery, Amy caught me studying my reflection in the mirror. We made eye contact. "You nervous about this one?" she asked.

I studied my face again. "A little. If it works, it would be huge." There were small portions of healthy pink on my face—the half-moon under my left eye; my nose; my lips and chin. Everything straight down the middle had now emerged as more recognizably human. But the sides of my face still looked like they'd been melted by a blowtorch. The surgery tomorrow had the chance to transform all

that. "My whole face might be peachy pink soon." I looked down at Amy. "Wouldn't that be nice to look at?"

"You're already my favorite person to look at," she said. "No matter what facial version we're on."

Early the next morning, Amy said goodbye to me as they wheeled me into the operating room. "See you when you wake up!" she called.

Hours later, I blinked awake. Dr. Spence was sitting next to the bed. That was weird—usually, he only stopped by briefly. Amy was sitting on the other side. She looked concerned.

"What is it?" I asked thickly, still groggy from the pain meds.

"We've had a complication," Dr. Spence said, letting out a quick exhale, as though trying to stifle his frustration. "The pedicle blood vessel wasn't where we expected it to be, which meant we weren't able to do the rotational flap."

"You didn't do it?"

"We did the full-thickness graft on one side, but there's no active blood supply. We had already cut away the scar tissue so..." Dr. Spence pressed his eyes closed. "That was really our only option."

I tried to piece together conclusions through the fog of the medication. "So...what happened to the other side?"

"They didn't do the other side," Amy said quietly. "They're going to wait until there's a better plan in place."

"And there's no good blood flow to the graft you did?"

He shook his head tightly.

"What are the odds that it takes?" I asked.

He glanced over at Amy. "Eat everything she tells you to eat." He paused. "And get everyone you know to pray."

We followed his instructions. But even with Amy's nutritional regimen and an army of prayer warriors, the new graft on my cheek turned gray. Later, it turned black. Like—the black of your computer screen when it's shut off. Totally, horribly, black.

It had died.

One side of my face was still mottled and red. The other looked

like charcoal. And adding insult to injury, my risk of infection with the dead skin sitting on the raw tissue beneath went way up.

We knew we had to start over. That was crushing. All the effort to make things better and reclaim some sort of redeemed facial identity had only ended up with a dead graft.

Death. When would it stop following me?



The blackened and dead graft. August 2010.

Regardless of whether I wanted to or not, the only option was to continue plunging forward, one step at a time.

The facial reconstruction dragged on. Each cheek was an ordeal. The graft for my neck was also a huge surgery, which thankfully was successful. Dr. Spence informed us proudly that it was the largest full-thickness reconstructive skin graft he'd ever done.

We wrapped things up with my ears—those gnarled little bits of scarred tissue that looked like cooked bacon which still clung to the sides of my head. After deliberating over a number of options, we decided to cut them off and opt for prosthetic ones instead.

"I remember when I had to decide whether or not to amputate my finger," I told Amy. "It felt like such a big deal. Now look at me. Cutting my ears off."

"You've come so far," she said with mock pride. She patted me on the back.

After three years of recovery and more than a year working on The Face, we were nearing a point that felt complete. I didn't necessarily love where I was at, but I knew that I was approaching the slippery slope of turning plastic surgery into a never-ending project. I still looked like a burn victim—but I looked a whole lot better than on my wedding day. Wasn't I always going to be able to find something to find fault with? I decided I could choose to accept it instead, and try to move on.

Besides, I was just *tired*. My motivation to do all the work of healing seemed to wane with each subsequent surgery. I wanted life to be about something other than making myself prettier.

One afternoon, I got a call from a guy I knew through a wounded veterans organization. He had gotten inspired after meeting me at an event and had started a non-profit to help burn survivors. He was very aggressive—in a positive way—about raising money and doing research about the latest medical advancements in burn survivor care. I'd grown to respect him and everything he was doing for guys like me.

I could hear his excitement over the phone. "Sam, I've gotten in contact with a plastic surgeon who just completed the world's first

full face transplant in China. It was successful! And he's willing to do a full face transplant on you, at *no* cost. He would do it as part of his research."

"Really," I said, almost in disbelief.

"It would mean a scar-free face, Sam. A fresh start. There's a high likelihood you wouldn't even look like a burn survivor anymore."

I asked a few more questions. We agreed to talk again soon.

That night, Amy asked me how I was feeling about the conversation as we got ready for bed. I shrugged. "I don't know, babe. I was finally feeling kind of happy with where I'm at. I know *this* could be a better outcome—" I gestured at my face. "But there's also risk. It could be worse."

She nodded, looking serious.

"It's been a ton of time and work already...and I'm really okay with where I'm at. I've started feeling familiar with how I look now. There's almost a comfort in living in what's known."

"We've gone through *so* much to get to this point," she said. We climbed into bed and pulled up the covers. I looked at her next to me on the pillow.

"The guy said I might not even look like a burn survivor anymore. It would be a scar-free face."

Amy furrowed her eyebrows. "But your scars are such a huge part of your story. I fell in love with you because of who you were underneath the scars, but also *because* of the scars. It was the combination of seeing your joy despite the evidence of what you'd gone through that was so amazing to me. For goodness' sake, Sam, your scars are a huge reason I know Jesus."

The impact of what she was saying wasn't lost on me. "I think the guy means well. He's coming from a nice place," I said.

"I'm sure he is," she agreed.

"He's probably not going to believe it if I turn down a scar-free face, done by a world-class surgeon at no cost to me. But...I just don't feel like it's worth it."

Amy sighed, contentedly. "That's how I feel too. I'm glad we're on the same page." She kissed my nose. "You look good."

"I'm happy where we're at. Are you happy with where we're at?"

She turned off the light and snuggled down next to me. "I've always been happy."

I thought about Amy's words as her breathing grew deep and even next to me. It was true—my scars had become part of my story. They were part of my identity now. And it was a part of my identity I didn't want to lose.