

Never Strikes Twice

He'd stopped to catch his breath - hands on knees, back arched, head down - when he became aware, as he gasped away his exertions, of a scrap of seaweed lying between his feet. He considered himself a practical man, not someone given to art or the poetic, but the contrast of the scarlet weed against the blond sand was arresting. Flattened by the waves into a botanical illustration, the branching red fronds, delicate like cardinal's feathers, shone slick from the surf's repeating wash. He'd recovered his breath, chided himself for indulging in sensibilities, and, as he turned to run back, crushed the pretty specimen under his heel. Every beach run since then he'd looked for its like, and every beach run since, he'd been disappointed.

Now his breath catches as if he's run miles and his hands tighten on his clipboard. He half-expects to feel the salt breeze sting his face, to have the foetid tang of kelp assault his nostrils, to hear the rush of waves, but the room is sealed and still, the only smell disinfectant, the only sounds the background noise from the machines in the ward.

He'd stepped around the curtain expecting to find nothing more than another patient to check, another job to tick off his evening's duties. Instead, he saw white skin against white sheets, then a bare shoulder branded with vivid fractals, the branching pattern feathering the length of her right arm like a lacy glove.

The marks are angry under the fluorescent lighting and, though he's compelled to know more, it's an effort for him to drag his gaze from the unconscious patient to her notes. She's in her thirties, of average health, unremarkable in every way until now. When the lightning passed through her body, it stopped her heart. CPR brought her back and now she's under observation until cleared to leave Intensive Care. Her internals are fine but bear further monitoring. She has burns to her feet where the electricity exited, then there are the extensive Lichtenberg figures on her upper body, showing the path it took after it entered.

He approaches the bed, struggling not to scrutinise the map she has become and marvelling at this test to his professionalism. The fronds demand tracing and no one would know if his fingertip was to follow the lightning's path.

When the curtain is pulled back, he jumps. Another man enters the space.

'Hi,' the interloper whispers, 'Sorry I'm late. I had to leave the kids with my mother and they didn't want me to go. I'm Dean Barker, Amanda's husband.'

Dean walks to the opposite side of the bed, leans over the patient and whispers into her ear, stroking her left hand as he settles in one of the visitor chairs.

He regards Dean, loathing him for sullyng the moment with speech and context. And touch. He doesn't want anyone touching her.

I have to take her pulse.

He doesn't – one of the machines is an ECG - but he guesses Dean won't know. He lifts a pale wrist, feels the deadweight of unconscious flesh in his palm. The pulse is there, slow as breaking waves, and the skin is smooth and cool. He thought the figures would be like a normal cicatrix, raised all the way through, but the scarlet tributaries are mostly two-dimensional, like ink soaked into paper, except where they raise in small blisters, the tiny mounds so like the air-bladders on kelp, he half expects them to be wet with seawater.

'She went to get the clothes in before it rained,' Dean is saying, 'I heard the bang from the kitchen. Lucky I know my CPR. Can't believe it though. Did you know there's a one in half a million chance of being struck by lightning? I read that online.'

You'll need to leave while I run some tests.

Dean obeys with a promise to be right outside and removes his irritating narrative to the corridor.

The photographs which could get him fired are taken without identifying features – he doesn't need her face, only the crimson tracery. The specialists will want official photographs once she's awake and able to give consent. Dean was correct, the odds of being struck by lightning are rare, and the Lichtenberg scars more so. He imagines their image stuck in a file or a textbook, their rarity cheapened as part of a print-run and available to any medical student. He, however, will have his own record for posterity - angles and close-ups available to no one else. He tells himself his interest is professional.

As he exits, he gives Dean permission to re-enter. Dean pesters him with questions which he's obliged to answer.

She's fine. Everything is as we would expect and she won't need to stay in the ICU much longer.

He walks away, leaving Dean bleating gratitude and superfluous comments about how happy the children will be. That night he hits the beach, pushing himself to run far, run hard, and not look down. There's a storm coming, heavy clouds perceptible on the horizon even in the darkness. Lightning shimmers within the massed forms. He

wonders how it feels when it strikes, if you feel anything at all or simply awake in a hospital with amnesia and scars - if you awake.

The next day he's anxious to get to work. On the train, he scrolls through the photos, again convincing himself his interest is scholarly. He's a medical expert so why shouldn't he be curious? He hopes the ward will be quiet and there will be no Dean.

He's aware he's holding his breath as he tugs the curtain aside, expecting a movie-moment where she is gone and he is presented with the *tabula rasa* of an unoccupied bed remade with fresh linen, but the tableau is as it was the previous evening, minus a few tubes and machines. She lies in the half-light and he can hear her breathing. She's alone. He's hardly aware of moving to the bedside until he's there, looking down, ready to release his arrested breath. Then he sees her skin.

It is immaculate. Incredulous, he grabs the clipboard, scans the day's notes. She had a quiet night, her breathing stabilised, they removed the tube. The Lichtenberg figures have disappeared as is, apparently, quite normal since they are a temporary phenomenon. She'll be moved to the general ward in the morning.

He blinks, peering closer, willing the marks to reappear. He touches her shoulder - the skin is still cool but the striated red has dissipated into a pink flush. The tiny blisters remain but are disconnected now with no fronds to link them. She could be any other patient. An expletive escapes him, the harsh vocalisation causing her eyes to open. She regards him for a moment, her unfocussed stare becoming a puzzled frown before she succumbs to sleep once more. He snatches his hand away, retreats.

That night he walks instead of running. He scans the sand for wave-brought treasures but the shore is as smooth and as featureless as a hospital bed.

The movie-moment occurs the next evening. He doesn't even have to pull back the curtain as it's completely drawn so he sees the empty bed as he enters. He distracts himself with his duties but, on his break, feels compelled to descend to the general ward, looking through the window of each room and not recognising her among the many women there. He goes to the nurses' station and asks for her by name. The room and bed number take him to a sleeping patient, her face clear of masks or tubes, her skin covered by a hospital gown. He walks away.

He avoids the general ward until he hears she's been discharged but, long after she's gone, he becomes aware that each time he's on duty he scans the beds looking

for her or her like. That is when he realises he's the one who's been permanently scarred.