Sample Scar Story

Hand Across a Globe

Before I was born, I was made only of possibility. I was just an inkling of what might happen if – if you put your hand on an electric burner that's still hot, if you fell on the ice while carrying, rather than wearing, your ice skates, if you, or someone coming toward you, were to actually run with scissors.

Existing in a realm hovering above suburban Minnesota, I didn't think I had much of a shot at being born at all. I figured I would have to wait for another assignment to another part of the globe where humans were more prevalent and accidents were more mathematically likely to occur. Asia, for example, or Africa.

I was even jealous of my brother who was assigned to a small island in the Pacific where machetes were held more than eating utensils.

He was born right away.

Despite my fears of never being born or of waiting for a seemingly interminable amount of time to be born, I was compelled into action on a mild spring day in 1976.

My host, Andrea Hansen, was attending her fifth grade science class at Countryside Elementary School in Edina, Minnesota, and attempting a newly prescribed project involved building a scale-model of the school – the entire school, with parking lot, playground and all.

Apparently, according to Andrea, the students were to first measure every aspect of the school's grounds using a surveyor's wheel made of cardboard and string. They were to walk from north to south and east to west, rolling the wheel and recording the number of rotations in order to determine the exact number of feet from here to there and there to here and upward and downward, too.

They were to record the measurements precisely enough to replicate them later, to scale, and then form, in proportional likeness, a mini elementary school made of wood, cardboard and papier mâché.

Andrea was fascinated by this challenge and wholeheartedly enjoyed the preliminary preparation. She was absolutely up to the challenge of recreating the one place she loved most in the world.

After Andrea spent two evenings measuring every aspect of the school which covered approximately three square suburban blocks, she arrived at fourth period ready to take the next step.

As the bell rang, Andrea perused the board, saw what was on the day's agenda, took out the appropriate supplies and sat straight in her chair eager to delve in.

Andrea's teacher, Mr. Koklas, announced with enthusiasm that they would each finally transfer their two-dimensional measurements into three-dimensional reality.

Mr. Koklas asked them all to put the flattened cardboard boxes they had brought from home onto their desks as he handed out additional supplies, including card stock, tape, glue, scissors and double-edged razor blades.

Come again? Andrea thought to herself.

Double-edged razor blades?

Indeed, Andrea's fifth grade science teacher, Mr. Koklas, handed out to each and every eleven year-old scientist a shiny, albeit still-in-its-sheath, double-edged razor blade with which they were to cut the cardboard they had brought and the card stock he had passed out, so that they might create exactly to scale the entirety of their school.

Andrea wondered if she should include in her requisite replica the razor blades themselves because surely they were more compelling than any set of stairs, pair of columns or collection of monkey bars, but she didn't dare ask about that for fear of being considered flippant or caustic or rude. Instead, she bit her lip, took a razor blade from the box, passed the box along to the student on her right and analyzed with wide open eyes this newfound tool that would certainly change the face of the school.

She took the blade from its sheath, touched its edges gingerly with her pointer finger, turned it over on its back and took the same action again.

Then she set the razor blade down and looked at her cardboard and her measurements.

She knew that in order to cut correctly she would have to first draw some lines. She measured and drew and measured and drew, then picked up the razor blade up and set in.

As she started to cut in a straight line directly toward her, she looked at the box she was cutting – at the angle and its path. She thought, as she cut, that the blade was headed for her wrist, but for some reason she didn't stop. Either she didn't know how to stop, or she didn't have time to stop, or she had hoped in vain that she wouldn't need to stop. Nonetheless, Andrea didn't, and she slit a deep line across her wrist over an inch and a quarter long.

Andrea stared at the open gash with the same fascination she had once used to stare at the blade and at school and at campfires and at moose and at all things she found to be awesome.

The gash turned from green to red and from painless to painful in about ten seconds flat, after which time she glanced at the front, toward the board, for either the teacher or for instructions on what to do if one should accidentally cut his wrist.

After she found no definitive direction, she clasped her hand, went up to the teacher who was sitting in his chair near the board. She nudged him with her elbow, showed him her hand and silently waited for him to respond.

Mr. Koklas reacted by grabbing her hand as tightly as a tourniquet, holding it up in front of the class and declaring, using his outside voice, "This is what happens when you don't follow directions!"

Andrea thought to herself, using her internal voice: *This is what happens when you give elementary school children razor blades* but knew enough not to say what she thought out loud.

Mr. Koklas gave her a pass for the nurse who wrapped her wrist in layers of gauze and told her to keep her hand in the air in a perpetual raise-your-hand-if-you-have-a-question gesture while she called Andrea's home. Andrea's mother took awhile picking her up but arrived before too much blood had been lost. She brought her to a doctor who would no doubt have a slew of questions. The doctor asked a few and gave Andrea stitches and a tetanus shot and a slightly admonishing speech, which Andrea thought would have been much better placed upon her bold and brazen teacher, Mr. Koklas.

On the way back from the doctor Andrea wondered a few things like what would have happened if she had cut her hand about an eighth of an inch to the right. Would she have bled to death? And would she still be allowed to finish her scale model because she really, really wanted to.

She also knew that henceforth she would heed her own instinctive warnings. If an internal voice were to say, "If you keep going on this path, you'll get hurt" she would listen and try to somehow stop.

This is where I come in. After a few days of gestation, during which eight stitches plied together two separate banks of skin, I started to form. I was increasingly bumpy and crooked and hard around the edges and displayed miniscule marks where the thick plastic stitches entered my host's punctured skin.

I think I made myself purposefully lumpy and imperfect so that Andrea would be reminded that life is lumpy and imperfect. And my location being dangerously close to a major artery would remind Andrea to not take life for granted.

After about a week, when the stitches were pulled out, I was ready to make a full appearance.
I was red, perhaps from feeling shy or from being newly born, and I was raised as though on alert.

Just as Andrea sat in her classroom chair eager to glean what was proffered, I was and have been raised up above skin, willing to dare to live.

After 35 years, I am still not very smooth, though I am more settled in and less interested in rising fully up. I guess that comes with age.