

**Two Scars
Against
One**

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by LaJoyce Martin

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The Telegram

To Martha Harris, wedlock meant what it said.

“When ya wed, ya lock arms t’gether an’ tread life’s trail to th’ finish,” she told her nine children. “Be th’ path strewed with stickers or be it reefed with roses.”

According to Martha, one locked in with one’s spouse forever and threw away the key. “Love can’t add. It’s always one, no more.” It was as simple as that.

“An’ jist because ya lock horns in a fuss is no cause to split th’ blanket,” she said. “Why, ifn I hadn’t been padlocked to yore paw by that preacher man, I’d’a undone with many a tiff. Even on days when we splatted like a churn an’ a dasher, we couldn’t manage one without th’ other.”

When the children were younger, they reacted to her “mama sermons” in variegated ways. Sally giggled. Chester nodded. Matthew sat unblinking. Sarah feigned boredom. Alan fidgeted. Dessie looked out the window toward the woodshed. The others usually managed to

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escape somehow.

“Marriage is a *vow* to God, stouter than a ‘pledge allegiance to th’ flag,” she would expostulate. “An’ to break a vow is a pure-out way of tellin’ a lie.” Sometimes she would add her most fearsome verse of Scripture: *All liars shall have their part in the lake of fire*. At other times she would forget and leave it off.

So when Chester’s marriage came to an end, she almost did too. That such an atrocity could happen to one of her own was too awful to contemplate. She claimed the blow hit her so hard it knocked her “ten years onward taward yon graveyard.”

“An’ it’s a good thang Henry’s a’ready turned to dust,” she declared. “He couldn’t’a stood it.” She threw up both hands in an exasperated half prayer. “God love his soul! He died an’ left th’ worstest of th’ worryin’ up to me. Worry keeps me busier than a barefoot boy standin’ on a anthill!”

Sally, who lived in her mother’s back yard, tried to console her. It didn’t work.

“But I thought,” reasoned Martha, “that when I got Alan married off, my worries would be over. That was th’ last of my brood a-solo. An’ now *th’ worst thang in th’ world has happened!* Sally-girl, it’s worsen’n *death!*” Out of her ample apron pocket came the cup towel to sop up the tears.

Sally spent the next few months patiently trying to explain away Martha’s endless “whys.” When she chopped down one, another grew in its place.

“Our Chester was bound to be good to her.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“I’m satisfied that he loved her.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“An’ he never neglected her fer his work.”

“No, Mama.”

“Solomon said to ever’thang there’s a season. I say to ever’thang there’s a *reason*. Now, Sally-girl, if I could jist figger a reason—”

“Mama, you can’t lay the blame—”

“I ain’t tryin’ to find a patch to plant no blame in, Sally. Puttin’ down seeds o’ blame is a bad thang to do. They grow all weedish without waterin’, then ever’thang gits stickery. I’m jist tryin’ to make some sense in my mind of th’ whole thang before it insanes me.”

Martha finally worked herself into such a fret that Sally feared for her mother’s health. That’s when she decided to go to Chester’s office in the nearby village of Walnut Springs to have a talk with him.

Chester was busy when she arrived, attending to a nasty cut on a toddler’s head. When he finished cleaning the injury and pulling the skin together, he plastered the wound with the thin membrane from an eggshell. “An old wives’ remedy,” he said with a chuckle, “but it will keep the gash from leaving a scar. I don’t like *scars*.”

Sally watched as Chester lifted the child from the table and put him into his mother’s waiting arms. How could such large hands be so tender?

When they were alone, he turned to Sally with brotherly intuition. “What’s wrong, Sally?”

“It’s Mama, Chester. You and I need to have a talk.”

Chester walked to the door and hung out the “Closed” sign. “So we won’t be disturbed,” he explained. “Now tell me about it.”

“Ever since you came back here, Mama has been bent