

Burr's Sore

By Albert Howard Carter III

Sunday

Burr leaned on his putter and watched Sam putt. While Sam fiddled with his putter, Burr idly rubbed his forearm. Sam always took too long, but Burr waited. He scratched his forearm again, looking down to see if an insect was there. There was no insect, but a small red bump stood out from his tanned skin. The surrounding skin showed where he had rubbed and scratched. Burr watched with satisfaction as Sam left his putt well short, putting Burr ahead by two strokes. Sam was manager at a sister branch across town. Burr wanted to be manager at his own branch, and his recent promotion to assistant manager seemed to bode well for his future. He liked to tell himself *I'm on the way up*.

Monday

Burr arrived at the bank at 8:00 a.m., unlocked, entered, and relocked. He checked the entire branch, including the closets and both rest rooms. Then he set the signal by pulling a window curtain half way open so that the other employees would know all was clear inside. Before unlocking the front door again, he paused to look around the lobby. He looked at the eight tellers' windows, where he worked a few years back, before advancing from teller to new accounts and to assistant manager. As a teller, he never wore a suit, just the tie and an ironed shirt. Now he wore his suit every day, just like Morton—his branch manager. Morton was clearly on his way up. Someday he'd go to one of the larger branches or even go downtown. When that happened, Burr should be in line for his spot. For now, Burr had his own desk, a large wooden desk and a glass privacy wall, indeed a larger privacy wall than he had when in new accounts. He especially liked the sign on his desk that read:

BURR H. STEARNS
ASSISTANT MANAGER

Burr surveyed the lobby and felt in control. He rubbed his arm. He took off his jacket and hung it on a hanger behind his desk. He rolled up his sleeve. The bump was slightly larger and raised up a little. Maybe. He ran his finger over it. Maybe it was flat. He rolled down his sleeve, buttoned it, and unlocked the bank's front door to let in the tellers.

That evening he showed the bump to his wife Helen. She said it didn't look like much. This comforted him.

Tuesday

Burr opened up with a smile on his face. He was always the first person at the branch. He reviewed the bank's health: *our checking account sales have been outstanding, and our home equity loan program is going very well; savings account sales aren't so great, but what could you expect with*

interest rates so low? Burr himself didn't have much extra money to play with. He put money into two college funds for his children, his 401(k), and, of course, his house, on which he had quite a large mortgage—although recently refinanced for a low-as-possible rate.

It was a busy morning, for a Tuesday. Burr kept his jacket on. He was glad to see the line of people waiting in the crowd-control devices he had installed. The black stands and nylon webbing guided people neatly to the side of the lobby. "Next!" the tellers would call out and customers would advance one by one to the windows, making an even flow up and down the line. Before, some clients, women especially, would wait for particular tellers in order to chat. Worse, some of the women used to line up for Flynn's window. *Flynn the flake*. Flynn was young, tall, and good-looking. He wore his hair long—just to the collar, the bank's limit. Flynn was always cracking jokes. He had a southern accent and called the women "Hon," although Burr had spoken to him about that. Flynn hadn't been at the bank long, but he was recently moved off the teller line and into new accounts—Burr's old job.

After lunch Burr took off his coat and stood at his doorway, scanning the lobby. Jeff, the security guard, waved to him. Burr nodded back. He rubbed his arm. He went to the employees' rest room and rolled up his shirt. The bump was definitely larger and there was a red collar around it, slightly raised. The interior of it was sinking slightly and there was moisture in it. Burr broke out in a sweat. He once had a skin cancer removed from his back. He knew a guy from church who had died from a melanoma. He went back to his office and called his dermatologist. He couldn't get an appointment until next week but insisted on being seen by anyone else in the practice. He got an appointment with another doctor for the next day at 11:30. He explained all this to Helen that evening. "I think you did the right thing," she said, "especially with that thing you had on your back."

"Yeah," he said. "Once bitten, twice shy."

He didn't mention any of this to his two young children, of course, but he worried about what would happen to them if he died. Jen was six, Reuben four. They'd need him around for some time to come.

Wednesday

Burr opened up, made phone calls, answered email, and discussed a loan application with a customer. It was good to be busy. His forearm throbbed. The sore looked nastier this morning, with pus in the middle. He put a bandage over the disgusting mess and kept his jacket on all morning. He drove to the appointment. He checked in with the receptionist, then sat and leafed through old magazines. After a while, a nurse called his name and took him back to a small room strangely lit by fluorescent lights. The nurse took his vital signs and asked him the usual questions. She had him take off his jacket and shirt. She directed him to the examining table, where he sat awkwardly. She let him take off the bandage and looked at the sore without comment. "Doctor will be in a moment," she said. He looked at his arm, the sore was about the same, but the rest of his skin looked somewhat blue and unhealthy under the fluorescents.

It wasn't a moment, of course, but before long there was a knock on the door and a blonde woman in a lab coat came in carrying his chart. "I'm Dr. Haskins," she said. "How are you today?"

"Oh, not too bad," Burr said and held out his arm.

Dr. Haskins adjusted a lampstand and put on magnifying glasses. “How long have you had this?”

“I first noticed it Sunday afternoon.” He paused. She looked at it intently. “At the golf course. Sixteenth hole.” *How silly to say this.*

“Well, with your history we have to be careful, but I don’t think it’s a skin cancer. I can’t be sure, though. If you had this for two weeks, it might be. On the other hand, in two weeks, it might have resolved all by itself. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. That’s just four days, so we’re really on a cusp. We can wait and see, or we can do a biopsy and know within a week.”

“What if it’s cancer?”

“It’s very limited and we’re very early. We could excise it in a ten-minute procedure.” She looked at him. “We do it all the time. It’s not a big deal. Don’t worry about it. You did the right thing coming in, and if it’s benign it’ll probably heal itself.”

“How does the biopsy work? The squamous cell I had was misdiagnosed twice and got bigger....”

“That was another office, before you came here. The path people we use are spot-on accurate. We remove a small amount of tissue, and they read it right away. I would send them something from my own skin. Or my children’s.”

Burr liked this. For one thing, she had beautiful skin. Her husband was a lucky man.

“OK, let’s do it.” Once again he felt in charge.

“Good. Just lie back.” Burr stared at the ceiling as the doctor and nurse bustled about at his side. He felt a small injection and some scraping. He felt that the instruments were punishing whatever was eating his arm. “You’ll hear from me within the week,” Dr. Haskins said. “Any questions?” He said no, and the nurse handed him a packet of antibiotic, bandages, and an instruction sheet, which she read to him.

When he went to the window to make his co-pay, the woman gave him a paper that had the office visit charged to his insurance and also the charge for the pathology service. His eyes scanned the phrase “PATHOLOGY FOR LESION OF UNKNOWN ACTIVITY” and felt a little shudder in his body. He didn’t like the word “lesion.” The phrase “unknown activity” suggested something bad, like terrorists.

Thursday

When the alarm went off, Burr got up, showered, and examined his wound. It was larger, and one side of the crater was different, presumably where the doctor had removed some tissue. He liked the phrase, “removed a small amount of tissue” and repeated it in his mind. He could use that phrase if anyone asked, but no one did, because he kept his long sleeves buttoned at the wrist. At lunch time he changed the dressing. He didn’t like how the central area looked wet.

In the afternoon, some execs from the head office gave an hour’s presentation in the conference room about the demographics of the metro area. Burr knew most of what they were saying and replayed Sunday’s golf match in his mind. To his surprise, Flynn asked an intelligent question.

That night Helen wanted to listen to *La Boheme* on the radio. “It’s so sad,” she said. “They’re all young and poor, and Mimi is dying of tuberculosis.”

“Didn’t they get rid of that?” asked Burr.

“In the last century, yes, but the opera is some time back, and just everybody was dying of TB then.”

Burr shivered. The last skin test Burr had for TB *converted*, as the nurse put it, that is, got red and raised. “Do I have tuberculosis?” he had asked, alarmed. “Probably not, but we’ll get a chest X-ray just to be sure.” She had explained that his body made antibodies against TB germs because he was exposed to it somewhere...anywhere...in a mall, a movie theater. *Could someone in his bank have coughed and infected him?*

His chest X-ray had been clear.

While Helen listened to the opera, Burr read a story to Jen and Reuben and put them to bed. Then he got on the computer and read up on tuberculosis. Yes, it was coming back. What if the sore on his arm was tubercular? He couldn’t remember for sure, but maybe the skin test was in the exact same place as the current sore. He cleared his throat, then coughed, and broke into a sweat. Tuberculosis—could that be considered “the unknown activity”? Could he have caused it somehow? He hadn’t smoked since high school, when the football coach demanded that they all quit. Some actually did, including him. *I’ve got tuberculosis!* he thought. *What if I lose my arm? I couldn’t play golf. Or throw a football to my son. Or be branch manager.* He caught himself: *stop it, you wimp! Your chest X-ray was fine.* He didn’t mention this line of thinking—if thinking it was—to Helen.

Friday

Friday was a good day, the last day of the week, and payday as well. There was a festive air; lots of customers brought in paychecks and got cash for the weekend. The drive-through hummed. The zigzag line of customers moved right along, and the tellers were busy. Flynn opened new checking accounts, and both Burr and Morton took several loan applications. Burr felt a twinge from his forearm but took comfort that his tissue was being examined and that—either way the diagnosis might come down—he had a plan. The sore itself looked about the same, although in some lights it looked better and in some lights it looked worse.

About 2:00, his boss Morton came round. He looked exceptionally happy. “All ready for the weekend?” they asked each other in a hail-fellow-well-met sort of way. They both agreed they were ready. “Just look at all those happy customers,” said Morton. “That’s our life’s blood here. And the more they borrow, the better!” The men shared a quiet laugh, although Burr knew that Morton really wanted more borrowing by businesses, not just homeowners.

“By the way, could you step into the conference room?” Morton asked, and they walked over to the room and entered. Morton closed the door and took the chair at the head of the table. Burr sat to the side and leaned forward, waiting. The last time Burr had been called in here, a male teller was being fired for sexual harassment. Morton cleared his throat and placed his finger tips together in front of his tie. Burr thought of the old joke: a spider doing pushups on a mirror.

“I just wanted to give you a heads up, but this has to be strictly on the Q.T.”

“Sure. The Q.T. Of course,” Burr said. *What the hell did Q. T. actually mean?*

“Well,” Morton sat up in his chair and pushed out his chest, “John just called from the district office and asked if I would take over as manager of the downtown branch. You know, they have had a lot of problems down there.”

“Hey, great! Congratulations.” *Gosh, a big step for Morton. And an opening here!* went through Burr’s mind like lightning. Burr leaned forward and stuck out his hand. Morton took it and pumped it twice.

“Well, it is rather nice. I’m rather looking forward to it,” Morton preened. “I won’t actually move for another two weeks or so. And of course we’ll have to move on naming a replacement...for me...here.”

“Yes,” said Burr.

“You’ll be in the running, of course, although, Burr, I can’t promise you anything.”

“No,” said Burr.

The rest of the afternoon Burr played those two ideas against each other: yes, he’d certainly be promoted...no, he wouldn’t get the job. But he was definitely in the running, just like a Kentucky Derby race horse. *What an animal!* But he might not be first across the wire, and horses ahead of him might be kicking mud in his face.

Saturday

Burr and Helen slept as late as the kids would allow, snuggling and cuddling as they took their time getting up. They fixed breakfast in their pajamas. Burr looked at the sore. He couldn’t tell if the middle portion was a scab or his own natural skin. He wanted to think that it was healing, but it didn’t really appear to be doing so. He showed it to Helen and asked her opinion. She couldn’t tell either. Whenever would the doctor call? Probably not on the weekend, but surely Friday would have been possible!

Burr took the kids with him grocery shopping. They begged for ice cream and candy, and he supplied them. He got himself some treats too, including some good meat to grill that evening.

After dinner, Helen said they could use a new stove and, while they were at it, a new refrigerator also. Burr wanted to please her, but the family cash flow was a bit tight. *If only he could get that promotion!*

When they went to bed, Helen dozed off over her book. Burr gently removed it and turned off the lights. He lay in bed listening to her slow breathing, but he could not go to sleep. He worried about the money, the promotion, and, briefly, the tuberculosis. That wasn’t the problem, surely, but the sore was still there. As he thought about it, it started to throb once again. He started to sweat. What was the cause of this sore? He had skimmed an article about AIDS in Africa in the paper this morning. *No.* That couldn’t be...but what else? He’d never been unfaithful. He looked at the vague outline of his wife under the covers. *No,* she wouldn’t have. *Don’t share body fluids,* he recalled. The only possible time *no, couldn’t be* was the tri-state marketing conference. Some of the bankers were in the bar after a workshop. Burr drank more than usual and began to flirt with a tall brunette named Solange. He had never known anyone named that. Her eyes were dark and beautiful; a man could fall into them and be lost. As the others drifted away, he and she were left at the table alone. “Would you like to dance,” he asked, gesturing to the small dance floor. “Yes, but not here,” she said in a husky voice. They had kissed in the elevator and got off at her floor. He made a careful effort to walk as if sober. She, quite drunk, had some trouble with the plastic key card. They entered. She turned on the radio by the bed, found an easy listening station, and held out her arms. They danced slowly at first, but then stopped moving their feet and swayed gently, their bodies pressed together. She was warm...delicious. Soon they were on her bed, kissing long slow kisses, while he wondered whether he should be doing this and how far it might go, but enjoying it all the while. As

opposed to many women who wore pants and jackets these days, Solange had on a thin dress—silk, he guessed. Burr stroked her back, her breasts, her ass, her legs, elated that he could give pleasure to a cooperative female. She said, “I think I’m going to be sick,” and stumbled off to the bathroom. He heard retching and flushing of the toilet. When she came back, she looked terrible. “I’d better go,” he said. “Yeah,” she said and fell heavily into bed. He covered her with the bedspread. He kissed her forehead and left, disappointed that things hadn’t gone further but also relieved because he was still faithful to Helen. He looked for Solange the next day but didn’t see her—perhaps a good thing. Did she give him AIDS? Burr wasn’t sure if that was possible, just from kissing. He tormented himself with the possibility, though, and was soon feverish. He sweated through his pajamas. A night sweat! Wasn’t that one of the signs? He got up quietly and went out on the back porch to cool off. *What would he tell people if he had AIDS? Would they think he was gay? Oh, the shame of it all!*

“Why in the goddamn hell do I worry so much?” he said into the darkness of the back yard. “I’ve got to stop doing this shit.”

He went back to bed and found his side damp. Nonetheless he went to sleep.

Sunday

The next morning Helen said, “Did you sleep all right? You sure were thrashing all around.”

“No,” he said. “I didn’t. Bad dreams.”

Although Burr attended church with his family regularly, he was in truth really more of an Easter-and-Christmas Christian. This Sunday, however, he was interested in what the minister had to say. He felt he could use all the help he could get. The phrase that stuck with him most vividly was in the benediction: “Live your hopes and not your fears.”

I have got to try that, he thought.

At the golf course, Burr made an experiment. Instead of dwelling on what he did wrong, he pictured everything going as perfect as possible. He shot his low score for the year.

“What the hell is up with you?” asked Sam after they made the turn at nine. “You’re beating the crap out of me!”

“Dunno,” said Burr. But he did know.

That evening, while they were doing the dishes, Burr asked Helen, “Say, whatever does Q.T. mean?”

“Q. T.?”

“Yeah, you know, like ‘this has got to be on the Q. T.’”

“Gee, I don’t know. Doesn’t it kind of mean ‘kept quiet’? Maybe that’s it. Q. T. for ‘quiet.’”

“Might be. But we keep a lot of things quiet, don’t we, without saying so?”

“Oh, I guess so—sometimes anyway,” she said.

Monday

At last, Burr could honestly say that the sore looked better. The ridge around the edge was flatter, and the color was more pink than red. The middle part was perhaps a tiny bit smaller, and more probably a scab. But what was under the scab?

At work, Burr considered his competition for the promotion; actually, there wouldn’t be any. Not even Flynn the Flake—unless...*no, they couldn’t. Or could they?* There Flynn was,

smiling and talking animatedly with a customer. Burr strolled by his desk later, and they made small talk. If Flynn knew anything, he wasn't talking. Nor was he.

He called Helen to see if the doctor had called.

Nothing.

Tuesday

Burr called home again. Still nothing. *A week is up! Where in the hell was that phone call?* That doctor had been kind, efficient, and so pretty. Didn't she care? Didn't she know he'd worry? Should he phone the dermatology office? Go down there and raise hell?

The sore, however, did look a little better. Even Helen said so.

Wednesday

"By the way, Burr, could you step into the conference room?"

"Sure thing." *Please, give me the job!*

The men took their accustomed positions. Morton put his fingers together and flexed them like springs.

"Well, to come right to the point, I want you to know that we—that is, folks here—as well as downtown *Please, give me the job!* considered you very carefully." He paused and looked at his fingers.

Uh-oh.

"You have a good record here. Indeed, I think you'll have your own branch someday, and perhaps not before too long."

Damn and shit.

Burr waited. *Who got it?*

"We're going to concentrate on this neighborhood, which, as you know, is gentrifying. Look at all the new shops going in...especially the upscale groceries. We're going to be a niche branch, so to speak, but building a clientele that is involved, one way or another, in business all over the area. So we're going to be especially customer-friendly."

Flynn! The fucking flake! They asked Flynn, leapfrogged him way up the ladder!

"And, by the way, that cattle-herding thing out there"—Morton gestured toward the black stands and nylon webbing beyond the door—"will have to go. We tried it, but nobody likes it. We'll go back to as before."

Clarice! She's only a teller, but she got the job because she crapped all over my stands in the lobby.

Women like to chat!

"OK, that's fine. It really is. I always considered it a pilot project," Burr lied. "It can be gone tomorrow."

"That's what I like about you, Burr. You're a real team player."

"Not a problem. Really."

"Very good."

"Say, may I ask who might be succeeding you? Or is that determined yet?"

"Oh, we asked Tom Sturdivant."

"Who?"

"Tom Sturdivant. Good man. Has the Riverdale branch."

"Riverdale."

"Yeah, you ever been out there?"

"No."

“Well, they do a good job”

“I’m sure they do.”

“Damn it, Burr,” Morton separated his fingers and slapped the table. “I know you wanted this promotion. But look, you’ll do fine with Tom and, as I wish to emphasize”—he rejoined his fingers and pumped them—“there will be another spot for you. Do you hear me?”

“Yes...I am disappointed, quite frankly, but maybe...I wasn’t thinking large enough or long-term enough.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Long-term. Definitely, that’s it.” Morton stood up and held out his right hand. Burr held out his, with the hidden but slowly healing sore on his arm, and they shook hands.

Back at his desk, Burr examined his forearm. The skin in the middle of the sore was now very clearly a scab; in fact it was starting to pull away from the sides and gave every promise that it might pop off before long. He went to lunch.

Back at his desk he called home. Nothing.

About 3:00 p.m., Helen called Burr.

“Honey, there’s a card from the dermatology people.”

“Oh, really? Finally! What does it say?”

“I can’t tell; it’s folded shut and sealed.”

“Well, open it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. We both need to know.”

“Um...let’s see.”

He heard a little tear.

“There’s boxes,” she said, “and one’s checked. Let’s see...um...Your pathology results showed benign growths; no further treatment is necessary,” she read.

“Hot dog. Read it again.”

She did so, then said, “Oh, that’s great! But why does it say ‘growths’? Or maybe it doesn’t really. The ‘s’ is in parentheses.”

“To cover all situations, I guess. I just had one.”

“Well, that was more than enough. I know you were worried.”

“Yeah, I was. I shouldn’t worry like that, but I did.”

“Some people do, especially if they’re sensitive...like you.”

“Hmm, well maybe, I dunno. Hey, let’s go out to dinner to celebrate.”

“On a week night?”

“Absolutely, tonight. We’re celebrating. With the kids. Anywhere you want.”

“Anywhere?”

“You bet.”

“OK...I know just the place,” she enthused. “Diane told me about it. They have dancing. And we’ll get a sitter.”

“A sitter?”

“Sure. We’ll do something special for the kids this weekend. Maybe a picnic at the zoo.”

“Sweetheart, you’ve got yourself a deal.”

Saturday

Burr and his family took a picnic to the zoo. While the kids ran from cage to cage, Burr and Helen strolled hand in hand. Each thought of the wonderful time they had at the restaurant, the food, the dancing.

At the monkey pavilion Burr told her about the promotion he didn't get but the possibility of another one.

"I just know something will be along for you," she said.

They stood awhile watching the boisterous activity of the monkeys, which reminded him of everyone in banking, and he started to grin. He listened to their jabber and chatter, which made him think of some of the thoughts he had allowed to run amuck in his head lately. He laughed out loud, and Helen asked why he was laughing. He explained, and she laughed too, then put her hand on his healing arm, and leaned against him.

That afternoon the scab fell away, revealing beautifully healing skin.

That evening, Burr and Helen put the kids to bed, sat on the back porch talking for a while, went to bed, cuddled, and made slow, blissful love.

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