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THE
BIRTHMARK

Retold by Sara Simpson

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By Nathaniel Hawthorne
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About 70 years ago, there was a scientist. He was an expert in every type of science, and his work was the most important thing in his life. It was an exciting time to be a scientist; electricity and other discoveries were new. It seemed like all the mysteries of nature would finally be understood. Human beings would finally have knowledge that, until now, only God understood. Aylmer loved his work more than anything else in the world. His work was his passion.

One day, he met a beautiful young woman named Georgiana. For the first time in his life, he loved something more than science. They got married. For the first time in his life, he wanted to spend time outside of his lab. Aylmer's love for his young wife might have been stronger than his love of science, but he found a way to combine his two loves.

And that is the reason why we have this story.

Not long after Aylmer and Georgiana were married, he sat looking at his wife. There was something bothering him. It was the birthmark on her cheek. Georgiana was very pretty. Everything about her was perfect...except for the birthmark. It was deep red and was about the size of two fingertips on her left cheek. The birthmark looked just like a small handprint. When she blushed and the rest of her face turned red, you couldn't even see the birthmark; the rest of the time, however, it stood out on her face. People who cared about Georgiana liked her birthmark and said it looked like a fairy had touched her cheek and given her magic powers to make everyone love her. Before she married Aylmer, lots of men were in love with Georgiana. Any of those men would have given anything to be able to kiss that birthmark. They didn't give her birthmark a second thought.

"Georgiana," Aylmer said, "have you ever thought about having your birthmark removed?"

"No," Georgiana said, smiling. "In fact, so many people have told me it's a good luck charm that I wouldn't want to remove it."

"On different woman, the birthmark would be fine," Aylmer said, "but you are such a beautiful woman. Your birthmark is the only thing about you that isn't perfect."

"Not perfect?" cried Georgiana. He hurt her feelings badly. Her face turned red with anger, then she started to cry. "Why did you marry me, then, if you hate the way I look so much? How can you love me if you hate the way I look?"

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Aylmer and Georgiana were newlyweds, and it should have been the happiest time of their lives. But it wasn't. Every day, Aylmer stared at her birthmark. It was all he could think about. Maybe if she hadn't been so pretty, it wouldn't have bothered him so much. He started to think of her birthmark as bad, and that thought was stronger than his love for her.

Whatever they were doing, whatever they were talking about, the topic always came back to Georgiana's birthmark. Georgiana was never the one to bring up the topic; it was always Aylmer. Day and night, he stared at her birthmark with disgust in his eyes. Georgiana started to feel ashamed every time he looked at her. When Aylmer looked at her, all the color would drain out of her face, making the birthmark stand out even more.

One evening, Georgiana was the one to start a talk about her birthmark. The night before, Aylmer had

a bad dream. He was talking in his sleep about her birthmark.

“Aylmer, do you remember having a dream about my birthmark last night?” Georgiana said.

“No,” Aylmer said quickly. He tried to sound calm. “Well...I *may* have had a dream about it. Right before I went to sleep, I was thinking about it.”

“You did have a dream,” Georgiana said. She was talking quickly so she could finish what she wanted to say before she started to cry. “You were talking in your sleep. You said, ‘The birthmark is in her heart now! We have to get it out!’”

Aylmer remembered the dream now. In the dream, he was a surgeon trying to cut the birthmark off her cheek, but the deeper he cut, the deeper the hand-shaped mark went into her skin. Finally, the tiny hand sunk into her body and wrapped around her heart. He had to get it off her heart, even if cutting it off killed her.

Aylmer felt guilty. His dream told him the truth about how far he was willing to go to get rid of Georgiana’s birthmark. He was willing to risk killing her if it meant the birthmark would be gone.

“Aylmer,” Georgiana continued, “I don’t know what I would need to do to get rid of this birthmark, but I will do it. Cutting it off may cause a terrible scar; it might even kill me. I don’t care. This tiny hand has a grip on our lives and is ruining everything. Do you know a way we can get rid of it?”

“Dearest Georgiana, I have thought a lot about what to do, and I have an idea for getting rid of it that I am sure will work,” Aylmer said.

“If there is any chance at all, I want to do it,” Georgiana said. “As long as I have this birthmark on my face, you will look at me with disgust in your eyes. Life isn’t worth living if you look at me that way. I’d rather be dead than see you look at me

that way. You are a great scientist. You have made amazing discoveries. Surely you are smart enough to find a way to get rid of this small mark. You would finally be at peace, and you would save me from losing my mind.”

“My dear, sweet wife!” Aylmer cried. “Don’t worry. I know exactly what to do. Nature made you so close to perfect. With help from science, you really *can* be perfect. Trying to figure out what to do has made me discover many new ideas. I am sure I can make the cheek with the mark just as perfect as the other one. I know I can fix what Nature couldn’t.”

“It’s settled, then,” Georgiana said with a sad smile. “Do whatever you have to do to get rid of it so you’ll love me again.”

Aylmer kissed her on her right cheek, the one without the birthmark.

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The next day, Aylmer told his wife his plan. He would need a place to work where he could concentrate, and Georgiana would need a place where she would be able to rest. The two of them would move into the rooms next to his lab. His lab was his favorite place in the world. As a young man, he had spent almost all of his time there, trying to discover the mysteries of the universe. He had studied was the human body, the greatest masterpiece Nature created. As he studied the human body, there was one important truth he didn’t learn: no human being can create something as perfect as Nature. A human being is more likely to harm nature than help it when he interferes. On some level, Aylmer knew this, but he ignored that knowledge because he wanted to badly to see if he could erase Georgiana’s birthmark.

When Aylmer took Georgiana to the lab, she was afraid. He tried to smile and look into her eyes to let her know she shouldn’t be afraid, but the birthmark

looked so ugly that he shuddered in disgust.
Georgiana fainted.

“Aminadab, come here!” shouted Aylmer, calling for his assistant.

Aminadab came in from another room. He was short and stocky, with hair that hung in his eyes. He had been Aylmer’s assistant for many years and was very good at his job. He might not understand every experiment, but he had good hands and followed every direction Aylmer gave him. He was, in every way, the opposite of Aylmer, who was tall, thin, pale, and an intellectual.

“Aminadab, open the bedroom door and burn some incense so the smell will help her wake up,” Aylmer said.

“Yes, sir,” Aminadab said, looking down at Georgiana. “If she were my wife, I’d never part with that birthmark.”

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When Georgiana woke up, she was surprised to see how beautiful the room was. Aylmer had decorated the old, dingy lab room to look like a queen’s bedroom. There were beautiful curtains covering every all. The only thing missing was a window; sunlight might ruin the experiments. Aylmer watched his wife carefully, but he wasn’t worried. He had faith that his science would protect her.

“What happened?” Georgiana asked. Then, she remembered how her husband looked at her with disgust. She hid the birthmark with her hand.

“Don’t worry!” Aylmer said. “Don’t be ashamed. I am happy you have this mark because it will be such rapture to remove it.”

“Please don’t,” she said. “I’ll never forget how you looked at me. It was so awful.”

To help Georgiana feel better, Aylmer showed her some simple science experiments. Georgiana was amazed by what she saw; it all seemed like magic to her. When she started to feel tired of always being indoors out of the sunlight, Aylmer projected pictures--like a movie--onto the wall that seemed almost real. She was amazed again.

When she was tired of looking at pictures, Aylmer showed her a glass jar. The jar was full of dirt. There wasn’t much to see at first, but then she saw a plant start to grow right before her eyes: first a stalk, then leaves, and finally a perfect flower.

“It’s magic!” Georgiana cried. “I don’t dare to touch it!”

“No, pick it!” Aylmer said. “Smell it! The flower will die in just a few minutes. There won’t be anything left but the seeds, but those seeds will grow another flower. This will happen over and over again forever.”

Georgiana touched the flower, and the whole plant turned black and died.

“Her touch was too powerful of a stimulus,” Aylmer said thoughtfully to himself.

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Aylmer spent his days studying and doing experiments with different chemicals. At the end of the day, he would tell Georgiana about his progress. He loved to tell her about his science. He told her about the history of science and how many men before him had tried to create a potion that people could drink and live forever. He told her he was able to create this potion, but that he knew he should not do it. It would disrupt Nature and cause harm he couldn’t even imagine.

“Are you joking?” Georgiana said to him with fear in her eyes. “It is terrible to possess such power, or even dream of possessing it.”

“Don’t worry,” Aylmer said. “I wouldn’t actually do it. I’m just telling you about it to prove a point. If I can create a potion to make you live forever, think of how easy it will be to make one that will get rid of your birthmark.”

When he said the word “birthmark,” Georgiana automatically covered it with her hand and looked down in shame.

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After hours of hard work, Aylmer came back and took Georgiana to his lab. He showed her a cabinet full of strange chemicals.

“What is this one?” Georgiana asked, pointing to a small container of gold liquid. “It’s so beautiful.”

“It is the elixir of mortality. It is a very special poison. It’s very strong, and you have to be very careful using it. A tiny drop could make the difference between giving someone a dose that would let them live for many extra years and dropping dead on the spot.”

“Why do you keep such a dangerous drug?” Georgiana asked in horror.

“Don’t be afraid,” Aylmer said. “The good I can do with this drug outweighs the bad. I could put a few drops of this liquid into a glass of water, give it to someone, and all of the person’s freckles would be gone. With a few more drops, your birthmark would be gone.”

“Are you going to make a lotion with it and put it on my cheek?” Georgiana asked, nervous.

“No, that would only work for a small mark,” Aylmer said. “It will take more than that to get rid of your birthmark.”

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Every day, Aylmer talked to Georgiana. He asked her many questions. Was the room too hot or too cold? Was she hungry? How was she sleeping? Georgiana could tell that he was asking her questions the way a scientist would, not the way a loving husband would. She was sure he was already somehow experimenting on her but hadn’t told her. Her body felt strange. It felt a little good and a little painful, like something poking at her heart. Every day, she would look into the mirror, hoping the birthmark would be gone. Every day, the rest of her face looked paler, but the birthmark was as red as even. Not even Aylmer hated it as much as she did.

Aylmer spent more and more hours in his lab, leaving Georgiana alone. She read books from his library to pass the time. There was every type of book in the library--poetry, romance, philosophy, science. However, the most interesting book she found was one written by her own husband. In the book, he had written down every experiment he had ever done. Reading his words, Georgiana could tell how much he loved his work; it made her love him more than ever. He had achieved great things with his experiments. However, she noticed that Aylmer’s greatest successes fell far short of the results he set out to achieve. In his words, she could hear his frustration that his experiments always seemed to fall short of what he hoped for.

Reading her husband’s words made Georgiana both proud and sad. She put her head down onto the book and cried. Aylmer came in and saw her this way.

“It’s a bad idea to read a scientist’s notes,” he said. Aylmer was smiling, but Georgiana could tell he

was upset. “There are ideas in that book that upset me. You shouldn’t read it, or you’ll be upset, too.”

“Reading makes me love you more than ever,” she said.

“Just wait. My work with you will be my greatest success,” Aylmer said. “But forget about that for now. I came to see you so I could hear you sing to me. Will you sing to me?”

Georgiana sang to him, and her voice made him feel better. When she finished singing, he quickly went back to his lab. Georgiana almost called for him to come back, but she didn’t. She had forgotten to tell him something important. For the past two hours, she had been feeling a strange sensation in her birthmark. It didn’t really hurt, but it made her whole body feel restless. For the first time, she decided to follow him all the way into his lab.

A big furnace, hot and red, was the first thing she noticed. There were tubes and glasses and other strange scientific equipment everywhere. The room felt crowded, and the air smelled bad. As much as Georgiana disliked the room, it was the sight of her husband that surprised her the most.

Aylmer was pale as death. He was so focused on the experiment that he didn’t even notice her. He was nothing like the loving, happy man she had married. This person was a stranger to her.

“Be careful, Aminadab!” Aylmer snapped at his assistant. “If you put in too much or too little, it will all be ruined!”

Aminadab saw Georgiana first.

“Sir...” Ambinadab began.

Aylmer saw Georgiana. He ran up to her and grabbed her by the arm so hard it left a mark.

“Why did you come in here?” he shouted. “Don’t you trust me? Why would you bring that disgusting birthmark in here to ruin my work? Get out!”

“No, Aylmer,” Georgiana said firmly, sounding confident for the first time in months, “you have no right to tell me to leave. You have been lying to me. You have hidden your worry about this experiment from me. You have to trust me. You need to tell me everything. Don’t worry that I will feel afraid. I care more about you than I do about myself.”

“No, Georgiana,” Aylmer said. “I can’t do that.”

“I will drink whatever potion you bring me,” she said calmly. “I don’t care what you put in it. I don’t care if you bring me medicine to cure my birthmark or a cup of poison; I would drink either one if it would make you happy.”

“You’re so loyal,” Aylmer said. “I didn’t understand how loyal you are and how much you love me until now. I will tell you everything. You deserve to know. Your birthmark is much deeper in your skin than I thought. I have been giving you medicine in secret that should have been strong enough to remove the mark, but it is still there. I only have one more potion to try. If this one doesn’t work, there’s nothing else I can do.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Georgiana asked.

“Because it is dangerous,” Aylmer said.

“I don’t care how dangerous it is,” Georgiana said. “The worst thing that could happen to me would be if you couldn’t get this horrible mark off my cheek. You have to remove it, no matter what, or it will make us both crazy!”

“Go back to your room,” Aylmer said. “I will have the potion ready soon.”

Georgiana went back to her room, happy that she might actually be good enough for her husband

soon. She fell asleep, dreaming of a cheek without a birthmark.

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The sound of Aylmer coming into the room woke her up. He was carrying a glass with clear liquid inside. He was pale, but didn't seem to have any doubt that she should drink the potion.

"It's perfect," Aylmer said. "Unless all my science lets me down, it has to work."

"I hope it does," Georgiana said. "Life isn't worth living if you aren't willing to risk death for the person you love. If you had never told me the truth about how people see my mark, I might have been able to be happy the way I am. If I were strong, I might have been able to stand the shame of this mark. But, I know how much it disgusts you, and I'm too weak to live with that."

"We don't need to talk about death," Aylmer said. "This is going to work. Look what happens when I put it on this plant."

There was a flower in a pot sitting nearby. The plant was yellow and dying. Aylmer poured a drop of the liquid into the dirt in the pot. In just a few minutes, the plant was green and healthy with colorful flowers.

"I didn't need proof," Georgiana said. "I trust you."

"Drink it," Aylmer said. "Your heart and soul are already perfect. In a few minutes, your body will be perfect, too."

Georgiana took the glass and drank all the liquid inside.

"It tastes like water, only better," Georgiana said. "I've been so thirsty. For the first time in days, I've had enough to drink. I'm so tired. Let me sleep."

She had barely finished speaking before she was asleep. Aylmer sat on the bed next to her. He watched her carefully. Her cheeks flushed. Her breathing stopped and started again. Her eyelids fluttered. He wrote down everything he saw in his notebook.

Most of all, he watched the hand-shaped birthmark on her cheek. It still disgusted him, but he suddenly stopped writing, leaned over, and kissed it. Even in her sleep, Georgiana pulled away, ashamed to have him touch her birthmark. As he watched, he saw the birthmark get lighter. It was less red than it was before. For hours, he watched the birthmark fade and come back again.

Finally, it was almost gone. He could barely see it.

"I did it!" Aylmer cried. "But she looks so pale."

For the first time in weeks, Aylmer opened the curtains to let in the sun. He could barely see the birthmark. It was almost totally gone.

Georgiana woke up. She opened her eyes slowly and looked into the mirror Aylmer held in front of her. She smiled, then looked at her husband with sad eyes.

"My poor Aylmer," she said.

"Poor? No! I'm the happiest man alive!" Aylmer said. "You are perfect now!"

"My poor Aylmer," she said again. "You tried so hard. You did your best to fix what Nature ruined. But Aylmer...I'm dying."

It was true. As the very last trace of the birthmark faded from Georgiana's cheek, she took her last breath. In that moment, Aylmer realized what he had done. By trying to take something perfect and make it even better, he had destroyed it.

