

for life

Behind every scar
is a personal and
powerful story,
Leanne Delap learns
Photography by
Alkan Emin

MIKE, 45
(left)
“People are awkward. They’ll ask, ‘Were you stabbed?’ They tell the story of my survival.”

PAMELA, 63
(right)
“Stories? I have some doozies. I felt some inner need to finally expose my scars for reasons I cannot fully understand.”





As we age, we all inevitably get a little banged up. Like the concentric rings marking the age of a tree, scars are what we have to show for our time on this earth, chronicling bumps in the road. But more significant scars are signposts of events that change lives – and perspective. Toronto photographer Alkan Emin is known for his fashion and celebrity portraiture, most notably his work with Jann Arden. In his long-term series of art projects – which feature portraits of “real” people cast via Facebook – Emin has been tackling increasingly intimate subject matter, progressing from a white shirt series to achingly honest black-and-white nudes. “I want,” he says, “to get down to the truth of people.”

This time he sought out people willing to bare their scars for the camera. The impetus for the project came on the subway one day. “I saw a woman with scars on her face and I saw everyone watching her. I felt like she spent the entire time catching her breath.”

He decided to tackle the stigma of scars in our culture, to be the portal for his subjects to take back control of our gaze. “It was like saying ‘If you want to stare, here it is.’” The process moved him deeply: “It didn’t feel like I was actually shooting. You are opening that scar. By the end of the day, we stitch it back up.”

As for the subjects themselves, their feelings about their scars are as individual as they are, as unique as the surgeries and accidents they mark. But posing for Emin, they all agree, was a transformative experience. “The scar is part of my journey, and I have to own that,” says Anita. “I haven’t been able to cry,” she says of the past 18 months of cancer treatment. “I think this was the closest I’ve been to crying.”

There is power in exposing a scar to daylight. “Once I started sharing my story, others started sharing their stories with me,” says Mike of his extensive biopsy scars. “They were ashamed. But this is how we live and how we heal.”

At the end stages of healing, says Natalie, a blogger who founded High Heal Diaries, a platform to empower others to share healing stories, “You just want to give back. Scars make you beautiful and unique in your own way. And they say you are still standing.”

There is also power in enduring. Pamela says 2020 is the 30th anniversary of the start of her cancer story. The scars from those battles are joined by an abdominal scar from a critical snowmobile accident. “We limit ourselves. We don’t know how capable and strong we are until we push the limit. Scars are a constant reminder of the twists and turns life often delivers. They are also a reminder that it takes strength and courage to soldier on.” She walks that walk: Pamela sets a new challenge for herself every year – this past year it was to learn to speed skate – an affirming ritual to inspire all of us. ►

ANITA, 49
(top, left)
“Showing my scar was a big deal. Mental scars are the even harder part.”

JENNIFER, 48
(bottom, left)
“I’m saying this is normal. This is life. A breast doesn’t make me a woman.”

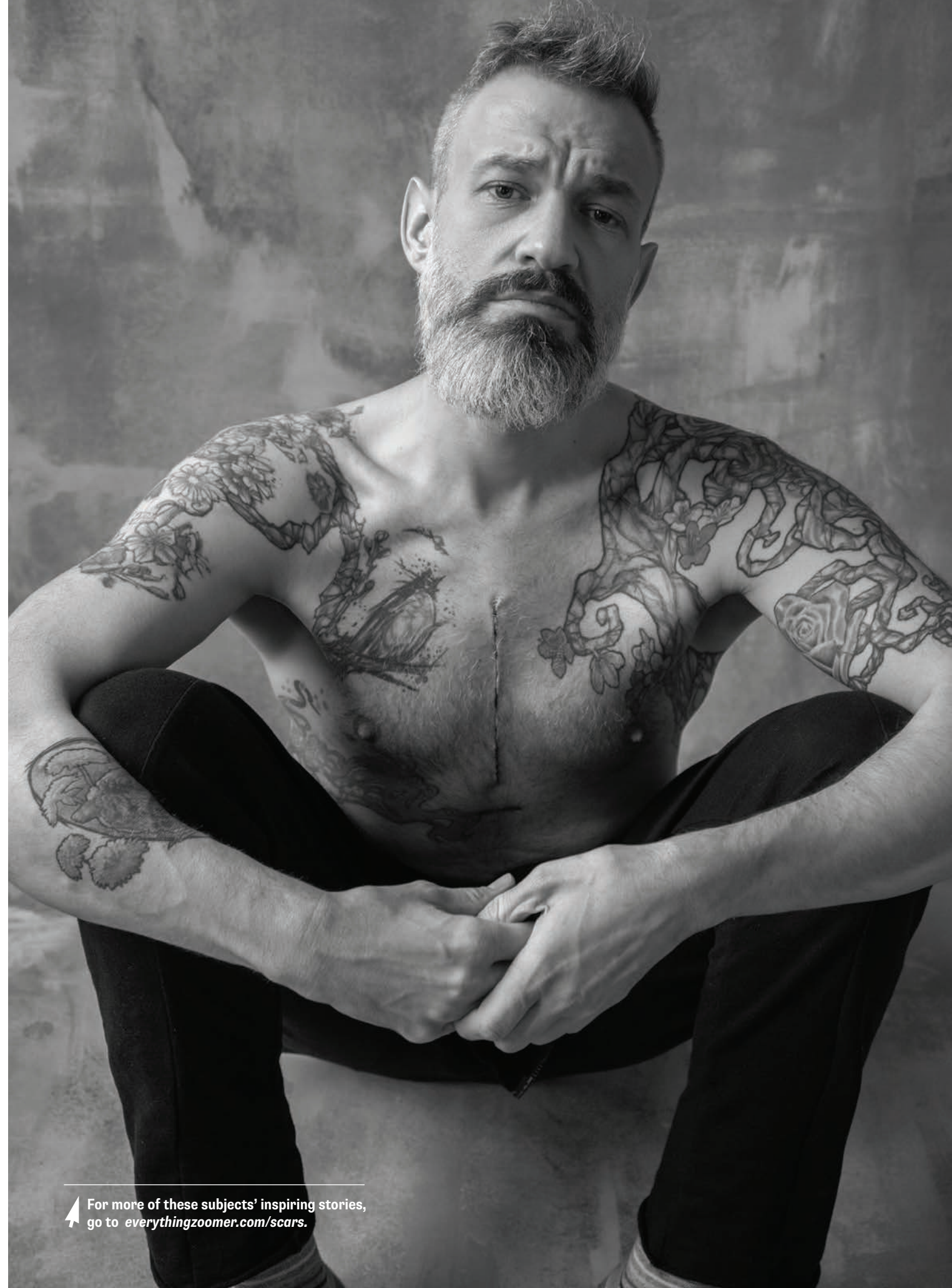
OLGA, 60
(right)
“I’m on my third cancer. Don’t dwell. You are resilient. You are worth it. Life is worth living.”





NATALIE, 47
(left)
“I’ve had 22 surgeries to date. I have a really good relationship with my scars.”

JAMES, 43
(right)
“My open-heart surgery scar is an oddly poetic manifestation of a really shitty year. Literal heartbreak.”



For more of these subjects’ inspiring stories, go to everythingzoomer.com/scars.