

The Texture of Scars

by Karen J. Weyant

At seven, I already had scars.

The comma-shaped scrape near my left eye was from Chicken Pox. It was a small notch, but deep enough that I could feel the tiny fold of skin with my fingers. A fine white slash on my cheek was from a cut on a barbed wire fence. This smooth scar was nearly invisible, but sometimes, when my fair skin burned and freckled from the sun, the line appeared brighter, a thin white string etched across my cheek.

Outside of listening to the origin stories of these blemishes, I didn't know much about scars, but somehow I realized that they were undesirable. I wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was because they never really went away, unlike the other scratches, bumps and bruises I obtained from riding my bike or playing at the local playground.

So that was why the summer before I started second grade, I listened to Nate White, who offered a helpful strategy on avoiding one kind of scar: the alleged mark left over from a mosquito bite that was scratched too much. Nate, who was one year younger than I was, but seemingly far wiser about the world, deemed himself an expert when it came to killing mosquitos.

According to Nate, you waited until a mosquito landed and slid its long needle into your skin. While the mosquito sucked your blood, you pulled your skin tight around the insect. Nate's theory was that the needle would get stuck, and unable to withdraw, the mosquito would feed until it eventually burst.

This idea fascinated me. Mosquitos caused me great misery, so this tactic sounded like the perfect revenge. During the mugginess of summer, I seemed the food source for

every mosquito in the neighborhood. They bit my ankles, my legs, my arms, even my face. I would find mosquito bites in the most unlikely of places, including the skin between my fingers or the space between my shoulders. Once, a mosquito got stuck underneath my shirt, and when, in a fit of shirt pulling and swatting, I was finally able to slap it away, I found a line of bites, red angry and inflamed like a constellation of bumpy stars, sprinkled across my stomach.

My mother covered me with smelly bug spray, but I guess mosquitos in rural Pennsylvania are extra sturdy because they bit through the spray. Then, my mother dabbed my bites with Campho Phenique crème, an over-the-counter medication that smelled worse than the spray. When I complained, she tried homemade remedies made with baking soda. No matter what she did, the bites still itched.

And I was not supposed to scratch them.

“You will break them open and cause scars,” she said.

Scars were something I didn’t want, so I tried Nate’s advice. I waited until a mosquito landed on my arm, and I pulled the skin around the insect taut. And then I waited a bit longer.

I don’t remember exactly what happened, except that the mosquito didn’t explode. Maybe it was so hungry it didn’t mind staying for extra food. Maybe I didn’t pull my skin tight enough. All I remember is that the result of this experiment was one of the worst, most inflamed bites I ever had.

I didn’t listen to my mother’s warnings. I scratched that bite raw, until it broke open, leaving spots of blood smeared on my skin.

But it didn’t leave a scar.

As a teenager, I learned to wear foundation to cover the thin line on my cheek. My textured bangs covered the chicken pox scar. Still, I earned other scars along the way. I have a thin scratch on the back of my hand from a broken mirror and an oval scar just below my knee from running into a shopping cart in a parking lot.

“Interesting scars tells interesting stories,” a friend once told me, but until I was thirty-five, I didn’t think that any of my scars’ stories were that intriguing.

Then came my diagnosis of thyroid cancer, and two surgeries that left a line of pinched skin on my neck from the removal of suspicious nodules.

At the time of diagnosis, I wasn’t worried about the scar. I just wanted the cancer out of me. But when I got home from the hospital, I stared at myself in the mirror, where black stitches were sewn across my neck. I fingered the string, marveling at how something that looked like it could come out of a sewing kit could help piece me together.

It was there at the bathroom mirror I realized that while the stitches would be removed, a scar would remain. I could disguise my other scars, but this one would be visible to the world. The only way I could hide it was with a turtleneck sweater.

At the time, I received a lot of advice about how to make the scar less noticeable. “Mederma”, my doctor said, while my friends advised using cocoa butter or Vitamin E. Nothing really worked, however, as the skin pulled and tugged, finally settling in place.

For the first year or so, I worried more about the cancer than the scar. I worried that my regular scans would pick up a bulging lymph node, one that could suggest that the cancer had resurfaced and spread. I worried that blood tests would find something abnormal. I worried that I would have to undergo surgery again and perhaps undergo more drastic treatments.

But test after test came back clear, and I started to be more concerned about my scar -- a scar that had faded from an angry, red thick line to a thin patch of white skin. I found myself explaining my surgery to complete strangers, such as a waitress who told me that her twin sister had a similar type of surgery to a young neighbor who worried that her little boy had to have neck surgery and she was concerned about the side effects and the pain.

I found myself reassuring my little neice who touched my neck.

“Boo-boo?” she asked, her whole face twisted into a worried frown.

“Yes,” I explained, reassuring her that “It was all better now.”

Now, over ten years later, I barely notice it, even when I look in the bathroom mirror every morning. This scar is now as part of me as my brown eyes or pale skin.

Still, there are days when I remember it’s there. Often, when I meet new people, I feel as if their eyes wander down from my face to the puckered skin. I’m a college professor, so when I know I am going to face a new class of students or when I give a public presentation, I search for creative ways to mask this blemish through turtlenecks, scarves, or beaded chokers.

But I know the pinched scar is there trying to peek through my disguises. It has joined my other scars, with perhaps a more interesting story to tell.

Still, in spite of my mother’s warnings etched in my memories, I don’t believe that I have a single scar from a mosquito bite.

It’s as if the body itself decides what it wants to mark, and we, even as wearers of our own skin, have little to say in the matter.

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