

Readers Write

SCARS

GROWING UP, I HAD A SCAR ON MY face — a perfect arrow in the center of my cheek, pointing at my left eye. I got it when I was three, long before I knew that scars were a bad thing, especially for a girl. I knew only that my scar brought me attention and tenderness and candy.

As I got older I began to take pride in my scar, in part to stop bullies from taunting me, but mainly as a reaction to the assumption that I should feel embarrassed. It's true, I was embarrassed the first couple of times someone pointed at my cheek and asked, "What's that?" or called me "Scarface." But the more I heard how unfortunate my scar was, the more I found myself liking it.

My friends liked it, too. They made up elaborate tales about how I'd gotten it in a fight or from a dog attack. They laughed at their stories and thought I was all the more interesting because I could laugh with them.

When I turned fifteen, my parents — on the advice of a plastic surgeon — de-

cided it was time to operate on what was now a thick, shiny red scar. As my father drove me home from the local mall, he explained that I would have the surgery during my summer vacation, to allow time for it to heal.

"But I don't mind the scar, really," I told him. "I don't need surgery." It had been years since I had been teased. And my friends, along with my boyfriend at the time, felt as I did, that my scar was unique and almost pretty in its own way. After so many years, it was a part of me.

"You do need surgery," my father said, his eyes on the road, his lips tight.

"But I like it," I told him. "I don't want to get rid of it."

"You need surgery," he said again, and he lowered his voice. "It's a deformity."

I don't know what hurt more that day: hearing my father call my scar a deformity, or realizing that it didn't matter to him how I felt about it.

I did have plastic surgery that summer. They cut out the left side of the arrow,

leaving a thinner, zigzag scar that blended into the lines of my face when I smiled. The following summer they did the same to the right side of the arrow. Finally, when I was eighteen, the surgeon sanded my cheek smooth.

In my late twenties, I took a long look at my scar, something I hadn't done in years. It was still visible in the right light, but no one asked me about it anymore. I examined the small steplike pattern and the way it made my cheek dimple when I smiled. As I leaned in awkwardly toward the mirror, I felt a sudden sadness.

There was something powerful about my scar and the defiant, proud person I became because of it. I have never been quite so strong since they cut it out.

*Cynthia Audet
Oakland, California*

I SEE THEM STILL, THE TWO GERMAN SS officers sitting in our sunroom. It was a warm, bright day in March 1945. They were smiling and laughing, drink-

ing coffee and smoking cigarettes. I can picture their faces and their beautiful, shiny black boots.

The officers were visiting my aunt, who lived with us at the time. They seemed carefree as they socialized. I wondered whether they were going to live with us, too, like all the other people who had sought refuge in our house. I resented their presence; I had already lost my bed to some strange “uncle.”

Shortly after my father came home, the officers left. I assumed that my father had asked them to leave because there were no more beds in our house. I had learned early on never to ask questions.

A day later I walked up our road, not really going anywhere. Our closest neighbor lived almost a mile away, and all along the road between our house and the neighbor’s grew big chestnut trees. The trees were my place to be alone, away from the noise and confusion of our house.

As I was walking, I noticed two pairs of black, shiny boots hanging amid the branches. When I looked up, I saw the two officers dangling by heavy ropes, dead.

I did not cry. I did not race home to tell anyone. I just kept walking, and I never climbed those trees again.

That night, I heard someone say that escaped prisoners from the forced-labor camp down the mountain had hanged the officers. One month later, the war was over.

It took me many years to feel safe enough to ask questions, but I never did ask anyone about those men from the ss. The experience left its mark on me to this day, and taught me that the border between good and evil is not always an obvious one, and that life can end suddenly. The smiling “uncle” faces of the ss officers were also the faces of mass murderers, and those men, so alive and care-free one day, were hanging dead from the trees the next.

*Sigrun Kuefner
Missoula, Montana*

SHE IS ABOUT THREE YEARS OLD AND was picked up by Animal Control while running stray on a busy street. Her ears droop softly, having never been sliced and forced into fierce points, as is customary for Dobermans. She has a band of scars

around her neck in a deep rut — marks of a collar or chain pulled so tight for so long that it cut into her flesh.

I take her outside to get acquainted. She is docile but preoccupied, and rarely makes eye contact. Despite my efforts to soothe her, she seems restless and uncertain, eager to return to the safety of her kennel. Still, I think she might make a good companion, once she gets used to me and has a safe, loving home.

I visit her again the next day to search for some sign that she might respond to my affection. When this doesn’t happen, I am disappointed and impatient. I can’t get past the scars on her neck. I am looking for a dog that can go with me to the nursing home where I work, a dog I can trust around loud noises, wheelchairs, and clumsy hands reaching out to pat her head. The hairless ring around this dog’s neck tells me she has endured long-standing misery and untold brutality. I am afraid she may lash out instinctively if some innocent person moves too fast or gets too close.

A few years later I am diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma — cancer of the lymph nodes. The doctors who take care of me are afraid their treatments will leave scars. As the surgeon prepares to remove the lymph nodes in my neck, he assures me that he will use invisible stitches and a special type of bandage that minimizes scarring. When oozing blisters appear on my chest and back from the radiation, the oncologist is adamant that I stop treatment until my skin has healed. He cautions me that I will scar and will never be able to wear low-cut dresses or blouses again.

While I appreciate these doctors’ optimism about my future, I am surprised at the emphasis they place on my vanity. I insist on proceeding uninterrupted with the radiation. There will be time for the lesions to close once the treatment is finished.

I have since adopted a dog that suffered early neglect and isolation. Her scars are not visible, but her desperate neediness and constant anxiety are. With love, time,

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they’re the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn’t as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we’re unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don’t want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under “Name Withheld” if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author’s name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don’t question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you’ve already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We’re sorry, but we can’t respond to or return your work, so don’t send your only copy unless you don’t want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you’ll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Wasting Time	February 1	July 2003
Size	March 1	August 2003
Blessings In Disguise	April 1	September 2003
Excuses	May 1	October 2003
Laughter	June 1	November 2003
Idealism	July 1	December 2003

and the help of an experienced dog handler, she is becoming more secure, and her inherent goodness is emerging. Like a cancer survivor, she is regaining confidence in life.

The Doberman that I did not adopt still haunts me. If I saw that dog now, ten years later, I would take a chance on her. I am no longer afraid of scars.

*Lonni Trykowski
Carmel, California*

TWO YEARS AGO, WHEN I WORKED AS a reporter for a big-city newspaper, I got to know a fifty-six-year-old heroin addict named Mark. Mark lived in one of the worst residential hotels in the city. Its elevator had not worked for at least a year, so Mark, who had broken his hip, had to hobble up the worn, twisted stairway with his walker. The manager charged Mark fifty dollars extra in rent, supposedly because he often had to help him up the stairs. I never saw him do this.

I visited with Mark on several occasions while working on a series about the people who lived in residential hotels. I would arrive at about ten in the morning, just as he was getting up, and bring him some cigarettes or coffee and a doughnut.

"Oh, thank you very much," he'd gush. "I have to have my sugar and my caffeine and my cigarettes. I'm an addictive personality!"

After I'd left, Mark would have his first fix of the day and then take the bus to his usual destination: a freeway on-ramp where he stood holding a sign: **DISABLED. PLEASE HELP.** Once he'd panhandled the fifty dollars he needed to buy more heroin, he'd return to the hotel.

Mark was convinced that he would not live in the hotel for longer than another month or two: He had plans. He would get into the city's methadone program. He would get his belongings out of storage. He'd start up his band again. He had a life.

He'd been saying all this for months.

One day, I ran into Mark in front of the hotel, just as he was returning from panhandling. He asked if I wanted to watch him shoot up. Sure, I said. He was already starting to go into withdrawal — or, as he put it, "starting to get sick." I followed

him up the stairs, listening to him pant. When we finally made it to his room, he melted the small brown rock in a bottle cap and drew the liquid into a syringe.

Then he rolled up his sleeve, and I saw his arm for the first time. It was covered with huge, awful patches of red, mangled skin. Nevertheless, he found a place for the syringe, stuck it in, and pressed the plunger. The instant the brown liquid went into his arm, he sighed. "God loves me," he said.

*Emily Gurnon
Arcata, California*

WHEN I LOOK BACK ON THAT TIME, I feel as if it were a puzzle with pieces missing. I can't understand why, after seeing the kind of damage she was capable of doing to her own body, I was willing to let her damage mine. The razor blade with the dried blood on it sat on my windowsill for months afterward.

Today I have an inch-long scar just below my right collarbone. It's shiny and clean. No matter how many times I convince myself to trust, to risk getting my heart broken, that scar will always be there. People sometimes ask about it. I don't usually tell them how I got it: Too much wine. Too many years of loneliness culminating in that one moment, as if all the desperation I'd ever felt were sitting there on the edge of that razor blade.

She did not force the razor to my skin. I let her do it while I watched, excited and silent. I thought it was passion. She thought it was a promise. Neither one of us had any idea what it was to love and be loved.

*Julie
Denver, Colorado*

"ACNE VULGARIS" — HOW I HATED that term. "Vulgar" was my mother's harshest criticism: to be vulgar was to be unlovable. And as an adolescent, that's exactly how I felt.

I had a form of acne that was profoundly disfiguring. Cone domes gave way to pustules, which in turn progressed into deep cysts, then abscesses, and then draining ulcers. Though my face was relatively clear, my shoulders, back, and chest looked like a volcanic wasteland. I detested my body. I would avoid

any circumstance that might require me to remove my shirt. I dreaded being seen and thought my life depended on hiding my condition.

Early on in my illness, I saw a dermatologist who frowned when I disrobed. He stepped away and shook his head, saying, "With skin like that, you'll never get into the armed forces."

I felt humiliated, alone, afraid — vulgar.

Years later, when my acne had become much worse, I saw another dermatologist. This man stepped toward me, placed his warm hand on my acne-ridden back, and said, "I see how much you're suffering. I think I can help you."

Both doctors gave me the same treatment. It does not surprise me, however, that I began to heal only after seeing the second doctor.

*James R. Dykes, M.D.
Durham, North Carolina*

I HAVE SCARS ON MY ARMS FROM MY years as a junkie. "Track marks," they are called. I think of a distant railroad track, its rails rusting like the dirty needles that once littered my apartment.

For a while after I stopped shooting up, I bore the scars with pride. The marks were bolder then, redder and often infected. They were remnants of a life I had chosen and stood by, despite its dangers and stigma. I wasn't just an addict, I told myself. I was creative, rebellious, strong. I insisted that the madness was not simply the result of heroin cravings. I had chosen to be this way. I was not a victim.

Only my partner at the time seemed to understand; he was an addict, too. We spent our postjunkie days drinking and telling each other the same glorified stories about our past.

Down the street from the apartment where I live now, a homeless woman and her boyfriend have set up camp beside a church wall. He is gone most of the day, possibly doing odd jobs or panhandling in a different neighborhood. She stays next to their cart of belongings, usually reading a book. They keep their area of sidewalk swept, their things folded neatly and covered with a blue tarp. She holds a little sign that says, **LONG STORY. MADE**

SOME MISTAKES. PLEASE HELP.

I think about the honesty of those words, written in black marker on cardboard. I think of how, in all my self-analysis and rambling reminiscences, I was never brave enough to own up to the same simple truth.

*Perine Parker
San Francisco, California*

IN NINTH GRADE, I WAS PAINFULLY impressionable. One summer evening after a Christian youth-group meeting, I was playing frisbee with my sister's best friend when I noticed two scars in the shape of letters on her finger. She told me they were the initials of the guy she liked. "You sterilize a pin or a needle," she explained, "and then you scratch the initials. When it starts to scab over, you have to keep picking at it until it scars."

For me, this presented no problem. I'd always loved to pick off scabs: not fast, but very slowly, so I could feel the pain.

I took a needle and matches up to my bedroom. Whose initials should I use? Since my mother had left my father, I'd been too preoccupied to think about a boyfriend. I had become a Christian just two years before, and I sometimes worried about my faith. I wanted to prove my devotion, so I etched a J and a C, for Jesus Christ, into the soft flesh next to my thumb.

That was more than thirty years ago. I often forget the scar is even there. I feel sort of sheepish about it now. I learned long ago that faith makes an indelible mark inside the heart, not on the body, and requires no outward sign.

*Jackie M.
Bellingham, Washington*

THEIR NAMES WOULD HAVE BEEN Louise, Thomas, and Robin — my three children who were never born. My girlfriend in college chose an abortion, and two other women I loved did the same. I began to feel there was something wrong with me. Apparently, I was good enough to fuck, but not good enough to marry.

I'm married now, with an eleven-year-old daughter. My dad died recently, and I've since grown keenly aware of the importance of family bonds. I still grieve the

loss of those children, those families, that different life. A few years ago, I went out into the woods and built a shrine with three little statues. No one, not even my wife, has seen them.

Name Withheld

MOM TOLD EVERYONE THAT SHE CUT herself while drying the dishes: "You try and dry the inside of a goddamn jelly jar," she said. The white pucker of skin circled her wrist like a ribbon tied carelessly around a package, as if the gift-wrapper hadn't the energy to do a better job.

Dad's scar came from a bayonet. The soldier who'd given it to him must have been close enough for Dad to smell him, but all Dad ever said was "Got it in the war."

My brother T. has a scar on his forehead in the shape of an arrowhead. He told the neighbor boys that it was part of his secret Indian heritage. The truth is I gave my brother that scar with the help of a rock after he called me "fatty" one too many times. The doctors thought he might die, but he didn't.

My oldest sister, C., used to have a scar on the side of her nose. She says that she didn't, but she did. She wouldn't have gotten it if she hadn't stuck a bell up there just to prove that she could.

J. was the baby of the family and had eyes like a cow: large and bulbous. Before the operation, they thought he was stupid, but it was just that he couldn't see the blackboard. After the surgery, they called him a genius.

My sister K. was the queen growing up. She still has perfect olive skin, with neither bump nor blemish — no trace at all of the madness that has left her mind as full of holes as a colander.

I came out all right. I'd be better if I'd never taken a bobby pin to my face, but I'm all right.

*Sheila
Los Angeles, California*

MALEEKA, WHOSE NAME MEANT "queen," was the first woman I met in the little desert village that was to be my home for two years. Her composure, her high cheekbones, and her solemn eyes told me that she lived up to her name. I stayed with her and her family for three months while

looking for a house of my own. As a foreigner, I was often an object of ridicule in the village, but Maleeka never laughed or pointed. She calmly and firmly taught me how to speak the language, how to cook over a fire, how to wash clothes by the well, and how to dance and sing.

Maleeka's husband, a highly honored village leader, had earned the title Hajj, because he'd made a pilgrimage to Mecca. I neither liked nor trusted him, but I had to maintain a cordial relationship with him in order to live in the village.

One morning, about a year after I arrived, I was working in the crowded health clinic when a young girl appeared at my elbow. "The Hajj has thrown fire on Maleeka," she murmured. Certain that I had misheard her, I asked her to repeat. "The Hajj has thrown fire on Maleeka," she whispered. "She's not doing well." Then she melted back into the crowd. I stood in stunned silence, my tears hidden from view by the scarf that covered my face.

I ran to Maleeka's sister's house, where Maleeka had fled. A silent group of women stood outside — no tears, no wailing, no talking. The fire had stripped Maleeka's flesh from scalp to waist on her right side. Using a clean feather quill, another woman and I carefully removed the charred skin as Maleeka nursed her newborn daughter. Despite my pleas, she did not go to the hospital for fear of police intervention, but her eldest son brought salve from a pharmacy.

I spent the next week at Maleeka's side, feeding her fluids and cleaning the burn. Amazingly, her face healed well. Her brown pigmentation bloomed from the scar tissue and eventually spread to match the left side, save a pucker of skin on her cheekbone. Yet beneath her clothes, from breast to hip, the skin healed in lumpy, uneven masses that itched and hurt her.

Just before I left, Maleeka summoned me to help Hajja Hooria, the Hajj's mother, who was feeling ill. When Hajja Hooria opened her dress to show me where she hurt, I saw that the skin between her breasts was twisted with thick scars. I glanced up and found Maleeka's dark eyes watching me.

*Julia L. McDonald
Lewiston, Maine*