

Changed Body, Unchanged Life

Category: Scars

written by Thelma Zirkelbach | April 5, 2024

March 29, 1955, two months before my twentieth birthday, began with sunshine and cloudless skies, and we opened the window of our sorority-house room to let in the gentle spring breeze. Walking to the University of Texas campus that morning was a joy. As I breathed in the scents of spring, I had no inkling that before the day was over, my life would change.

That afternoon, a late norther blew in, and I was glad to get back to my room and find that my roommate had turned on our gas heater. I paid no attention to the still-open window. A friend wandered in, and we chatted about the upcoming weekend as I stood warming myself with my back to the heater. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew in the window, and my friend shouted, "Your dress is on fire!"

Over my shoulder, I saw orange flames. I knew what I should do—stop, drop, and roll—but some primal instinct forced me to flee. Screaming, I ran until there was nowhere else to go. A group of girls gathered in the hall, echoing my screams as the fire climbed up my back and devoured a third of my skin. Finally, one brave girl dashed over, knocked me to the floor and rolled me in a bedspread. I thought the worst was over, but it was just beginning.

The firefighters came, my parents came, the doctor came. The next morning, I awoke in a hospital room to the odor of my own charred flesh. I would spend the next three months on the burn ward at Galveston's John Sealy Hospital. I remember pain, skin grafts, and Demerol shots that caused a momentary high and then sent me into a deep sleep until I awoke and the cycle repeated. I spent my twentieth birthday barely aware of that milestone, waiting for a graft to "take."

Although brutal, my treatment was successful, but my back and legs would forever wear remnants of the fire.

How does a twenty-year-old girl deal with a scarred body?

I managed. Once I had fully recovered, I relegated the scars to the back of my mind, refusing to let my imperfect body interfere with my life. I returned to college, graduated, married, raised two children, had a fulfilling career, wrote books and poems, grew old, cherished my memories.

My surgeon had said, "You'll never be happy about the burns, but you'll never be completely sad either." He was right. After the burns, I became stronger and more self-confident, never lettering my scars define me.

I am not a burn victim. I am a burn survivor.

Thelma Zirkelbach
Houston, Texas