

# It's Not What You Think

Category: Scars

written by Sara Ann Conkling | April 13, 2024

I remember the first time I saw the long, scraggly line on top of my forearm. "It looks great," I lied. The dermatology resident sat across from me, having just uncovered the wound left by his first surgery. As we both stared at it, I was remembering the roomful of people who'd surrounded my gurney, scrutinizing every move he made as he excised my skin cancer. I had felt sorry for him at the time. It was too big an audience for his first excision. So I was determined to be kind now.

"And you got it all," I added. It seemed important to me to remind him that the point of the surgery wasn't a beautiful closure but a successful excision. He had, indeed, gotten it all—along with a significant chunk of my arm.

The scar remained large enough to later provoke questioning from others, along with pitiful stares. Many people presumed I'd engaged in self-harm and done a lousy job, as the scar was vertical and not anywhere near my wrist. I wanted to ignore the impertinent questions, but I realized I couldn't ignore the presumptions. "Skin cancer," I would say. "Oh, I'm sorry," would be the usual reply. But no one ever apologized for the presumption.

A few years later, when I had insurance and more money, a plastic surgeon offered to "correct" the scar, without my asking. It appears to have bothered him more than it bothered me. I politely declined. As someone who had already had a lot of necessary surgery, I drew the line at anything that was purely cosmetic.

Forty years later, I recognize that scar as the first in a long series that would disfigure my face, neck, and ears. Gorlin's syndrome, a rare, incurable, genetic skin cancer, has rarely taken a break since that first surgery. I am thus unfortunately a regular fixture at my dermatologist's office. Each time I go, I have a little ritual where I look into the mirror and say goodbye to my face, as it is likely that's the last time I will see that particular combination of features and scars.

Of course I now realize how fortunate I was when I was only dealing with one scar and the presumptions around it. Today's scars are too numerous to count, and much more than skin deep.

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