

Carved Like a Pumpkin

Category: Surgery

written by Sara Ann Conkling | October 3, 2022

It's a few weeks before Halloween, that time of year when perfectly intact pumpkins are evident everywhere. I feel great empathy for their plight: "You have no idea what is going to happen next, buddy," I think. "Someone is going to take a knife to you, and you have no idea how your beautiful, smooth face is about to transform."

This has been my fate, for over forty years, due to Gorlin's syndrome: a rare, genetically based cancer. Chief among its manifestations are multiple, recurrent basal cell carcinomas. In Gorlin's, basal cell carcinoma is not related to sun exposure (though I still avoid the sun, so as not to add to my afflictions).

About every three months, I have to present myself to a dermatologist for a verdict I already know. I can identify my own lesions with 100-percent accuracy, which occasionally makes for an interesting discussion with the dermatologist. Very occasionally, the lesions can be treated with cryosurgery. But usually, I leave the visit with a surgery date—two or three.

I wish I could say that my presurgical ritual of looking in a mirror and saying goodbye to my face as I know it has become routine. It never is. I miss that my nose used to be symmetrical. That a chunk of one ear that was removed has made it very difficult to secure a mask during the pandemic. My eyebrows are nowhere near where they used to be. I'm missing some wrinkles where skin has been removed—but, again, not in a way that is balanced or attractive. And of course there the scars—some thinner, some thicker, some redder, some lighter.

And Gorlin's is, by far, not my greatest health problem. The dermatologist always mentions that point when describing my case to an intern or trainee. What follows is silence as the intern or trainee registers a combination of horror and pity. It's difficult to imagine that you could draw such a card from the deck of life and not have it be the worst card in your hand.

This brings me back to the pumpkin. "Yes, buddy, it could get worse. You could be headed for pie, or muffins, or ... only God knows." Maybe I will buy a pumpkin, take it home, and not cut it at all—just to prove that it's possible.

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