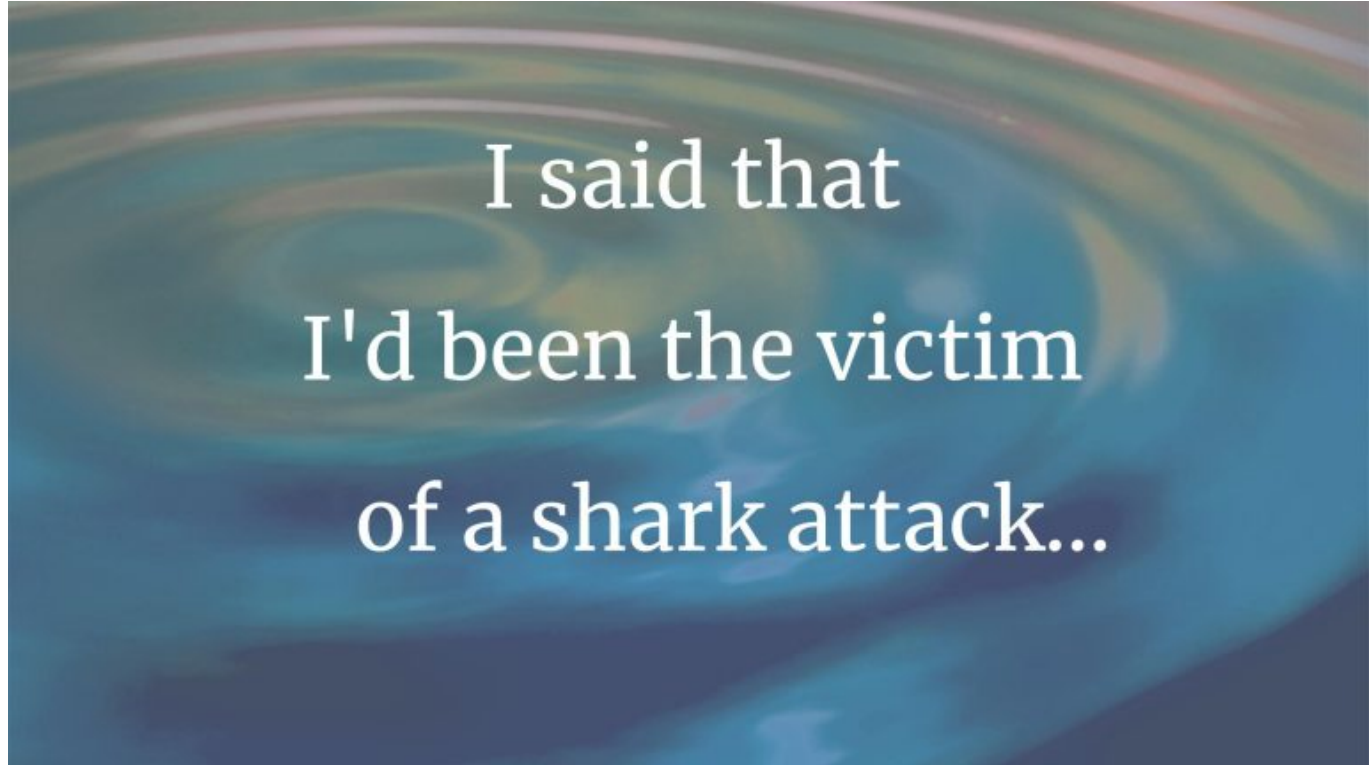


Scars

Category: Stories

written by Whittier Mikkelsen | March 19, 2024



I said that
I'd been the victim
of a shark attack...

Editor's Note: This piece was awarded an honorable mention in the Pulse writing contest, "On Being Different."

In the summer between second and third grade, when I was eight, I first realized that it was safer for me to hide my surgical scars.

I had two huge scars starting at my hip joints and running halfway down my outer thighs. They were "Dr. Frankenstein" scars, with obvious cross-hatches that couldn't be missed when I wore shorts or bathing suits.

That summer, my scars brought odd looks and comments from both children and adults.

"Oh, my, dear, what in the world happened to you?' ... "Those are so gross!"..."That's really too bad!"..."Can I see?"..."How far do those go?"

I hadn't even been aware that I would have scars after my surgery, much less that I'd have to deal with people's reactions to these permanent new marks on my legs. Fifty years ago, kids were viewed as "resilient"; there were no talks with grown-ups about what cerebral palsy was, or how it might affect me, and I'd been given no language to help me sort through the looks, questions and comments.

So when I couldn't hide my scars, I began telling stories to the kids who asked questions. Whenever I went swimming at the public pool, I'd get creative.

In one story, I'd fallen off the back of my brother's bike and had been rushed to the ER in my grandfather's car. I once told a ten-year-old that I'd fallen off a huge slide and was lucky to be alive. In this story, I even went in an ambulance. His eyes got big, and he looked at me as if I were one brave, tough cookie.

I liked that feeling.

Over time, my stories grew bigger and more detailed—and at times a bit gory. How else would a beautiful little girl have gotten such ugly scars? I said that I'd been the victim of a shark attack that summer—wow!—and had somehow managed to escape the shark's jaws right before death, with the scars as a trophy for my bravery: "That's why I have matching scars on both legs."

This was convincing to kids like me, with huge imaginations. I'd tell them anything to stop their questioning.

Anything but the truth: that I was born broken, in the eyes of my parents, my doctors and the world, and needing to be fixed.

That was my truth—one to be hidden as best I could. No one needed to know. No one. And by summer's end, I was tired of the stories and instead attempted to hide my scars.

Then came a day in Mr. Moran's third-grade classroom. We had been looking at large maps spread out on the table. This was a special activity, because Mr. Moran loved maps, and so did I. I felt content, and like just another kid in class. I was completely consumed with the joy of learning, stretching over the table to identify countries and rivers. Then I stepped back and turned around.

Behind me stood five or six girls, but it seemed more like a hundred, whispering and pointing down at my feet.

What are they whispering about? I thought, my mind still half immersed in the joy of maps. *Wait...it's about me.*

Then my joy evaporated, and my spirit dropped to the floor.

The scars.

My ankle scars were showing. Like those on my thighs, these looked like horror-movie scars, with long incision lines and cross-hatching to hold the skin together. They'd been created when the surgeons lengthened my Achilles tendons so that I could walk more fully on my feet, instead of on my toes, as my spastic cerebral palsy had forced me to do.

These girls knew that I was broken. They knew my truth that I'd worked so hard to hide. They knew that last year, in the second grade, I had disappeared for several months and had returned to school on crutches. They remembered that I'd had to learn to walk again.

I felt exposed. I had nowhere to go and didn't know what to do. How could I

have forgotten about the scars on the backs of my ankles? My delight in my cute new bobby socks with ruffles had distracted me from realizing how short those socks were...I should have been more aware.

What could I do? There was no fix. My eyes filled with tears as I pulled at my socks, trying desperately to hide the scars. The socks were too short, so instead I willed my scars to go away. I sat down in my chair, lining my ankles up with the chair legs to hide the scars. I willed the girls to look away. I willed myself to disappear. These girls wouldn't buy the lies that I used to make me look and feel brave. I felt angry and frightened.

They knew I was broken.

A tear slipped down my cheek. I raised my hand and asked to go to the bathroom. There I looked at my legs and counted the stitch marks on my thighs. I tried to stop crying so that I could return to my classroom—and to the looks.

Today, fifty years after the girls' whispers in Mr. Moran's classroom, I realize that I counted my stitches that day, and many other times afterwards, as a meditation. The counting calmed me down; it was my way of integrating and accepting the scars as the newest part of me.

As an adult, and several surgeries later, I no longer count my stitches. For one thing, the scars are no longer the most obvious indication of my disability. As my mobility has become increasingly limited, the scars have become more of a background to pain, crutches and my wheelchair.

Now when strangers look at me, I've learned to return their curious looks, in hope of making eye contact. Sometimes people look away, embarrassed at being caught staring. Other times, we hold each other's gaze long enough to share a smile and a gentle connection. Much depends on my mood and my pain level, as well as on the other person's reaction. Having people stare and not make a connection is difficult—but it's something that I experience every day.

Perhaps what's more important to me now, though, is my connection to myself. Just as when I counted my stitches as a child, I continue to search for ways to integrate the progression of my disability into my self-image and identity. What other people see as a difference, I am continually adjusting to—and seeking to know and accept as a part of me.