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My mother taught me how to care for pimples. She cornered me against the refrigerator early into my adolescent outbreak, magnets jutting into my scalp. "Sometimes, if your washcloth isn't enough to take care of a pimple, you can't just leave it alone," she said. With Kleenex wrapped like turbans around her index fingers, she dug her sharp nails into my chin, poking and prodding until the pain pooled tears. When finished, she showed me the results on the tissue, as if measuring her victory by the sum of pus and blood.

After this initial servicing, she regularly scoured my face for fresh signs of acne, for pimples past the washcloth stage that needed nails and tissue to attend them. Sometimes when talking to her about my English class or why I wanted to play football, her eyes roved over my face, hungry for humps to burst. As soon as I cut the conversation, she gave a non-committal response to my dialogue and pointed out the whitehead sprouting just beneath my lip. If she judged my face as suffering from an epidemic, or if she'd had a difficult day, she would shift from site to site across my face, performing a ritualistic purging, and when I viewed the aftermath in the bathroom, my face would be splotchy from eruptions, each summit seeping a mixture of blood and water.

As I neared my fourteenth birthday, my bodily space started to become my own. At first I just squirmed when the fingernails bit too hard, but then I refused to be trapped against the fridge. Despite her protests and pleadings, I grew independent enough to refuse her attention. She still looked at my face, sometimes with desire, and offered critiques or advice, but I avoided her touch. Although she wasn't physically caring for my face any longer, her instruction by example stuck with me. She had given me the protocol for how to care for my skin, and in lieu of alternative examples, I followed it. With great devotion, I excavated each pimple with fingernails not recently cut but well trimmed, toilet paper wrapped around the nails, and skin doused in warm water until pliable. My facial attention happened in the boys' bathroom three times a day, regular as meals: once in the morning, before school, once in the afternoon, after snacks of Ritz crackers and Cheez-Its, and right before bed, accompanied by teeth brushing. Afterwards the mirror was speckled with my flecks of my puss.

The problem was not just that I picked at my face but how long I did it. Even with the flagging energy following three hours of basketball or soccer practice, I would create a half-hour or hour slot to dowse my face for new lumps. Despite the seven people in my family, some nights I spent nearly two hours in the bathroom, poking and prodding at my skin. My attention was cyclical: I would fiddle with a pimple, then cycle around to all the others, then return to that pimple with a fiercer attack, repeat the

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cycle, then with a final attempt I would try to squeeze out the rest. The repeated attention, even after all the best efforts had been exhausted and perhaps even been as successful as possible, reeked of addiction.

Maybe I spent so much time picking at my face because for some odd reason I thought the attention would improve it, even though my face afterwards contradicted this idea. Yes, I did desperately want to be attractive, and because of my adolescent insecurity I was willing to attack my own body to become attractive. Just as women would starve themselves or obsessively exercise, I tried to manipulate my skin into cooperating with my vision of facial landscaping, a vision that included flat surfaces and uniform coloring. Perhaps a second motivation was pleasure. On a psycho-anal, psycho-sexual level, exploding objects from my body was enjoyable. It was fun to do, an easy repetitive game with enough familiarity that it was comforting. I never thought of either of these motivations back then.

With all the attention and time I gave to my face, it wasn't surprising that I developed a taxonomy of zits. In one of my many journals, I sketched and defined the categories in a grid, laying out their name and defining characteristics horizontally, with a third row devoted to counting the number popped in a week. As far as the numbers, I quickly lost count. As for the categories, of course there were the shooters, splattering my mirror. There was also the double, where pus ruptured up from a deeper cavern but didn't break the translucent membrane at the top, and required an additional squeeze before bursting to the surface. The silly string type was rare—a sizable pimple exhaled through a small aperture, emitting three to six inches of wire-thin pus. Some blimp pimples only oozed gelatinous fluid out into a dome, and I kept squeezing until it turned clear and then darkened to red.

Once I stepped into full-fledged adolescence, I realized my facial pollution radically trumped my comrades at school. They all pledged allegiance to a democratic representation of zits: three for their chin, perhaps two representatives from their forehead, and a couple delegates from left jaw. I, on the other hand, flew an anarchist flag: the blackheads fortified my nose, a battalion of white heads commandeered my forehead and chin, and bunker-like lumps entrenched themselves on my cheeks. There was more puss-submerged space on my face than clean skin, and in short, I looked hideous. If I had been older and wiser, I would have recognized this disparity as unjustified, and demanded doctor's visits. I would have known that my malady was not just an abnormal case but an extreme one outside acceptable limits. As it was, I retreated, spending every night locked in our bathroom, picking at my face.

Sometimes, as I returned to the family room for a final five minutes of television before bedtime, my mother would question me, worry draped on her words, why I had taken so long in the bathroom. "Just poking at my face," I'd reply, and she instantly identified, understanding my necessity to spend hours expelling foreign matter, understanding it best because she etched the impulse in me. Next she'd look over my face, assessing the pattern of work, judging each concentric blush around the epicenters, since an enlarged diameter meant I had unduly hounded it, and perhaps make a comment that I shouldn't tend my nose too much, as it became red as sunburn. When she stared at me, I felt slightly embarrassed, and shot a mental riposte blaming her for my facial blemishes, not only because she instilled the habit of poking my face, but because she had married a man with gland issues.

Overproduction of oil glands is genetic, and I know where mine came from: my father. In his adolescence, acne rippled across his face and back and chest and thighs, not sparing any part of his body. During freshman year of high school, he was lizard cheeks; he was demon butt and salamander. My grandmother took him to a dermatologist, who promptly prescribed a medicine that lacked even a placebo effect. It wasn't until his late twenties that he managed to control his outbreaks. His face bears the result of that failure, his skin pockmarked as a comet. His cheeks especially take the blame, displaying scooped-out pits like small calderas.

After a year or two of my bathroom lock-ins, my father's experience prodded him to look after my face beyond supplying me with Zest, and he drove me to a drug store where I selected desiccating soap bars and jugs of cream that promised immaculate skin in weeks. To his credit, he never spoke disparagingly about my problems, never even mentioned them in an offhand way that might embarrass me. Most of the time it was encouragement—"John, you are so much better looking than I was at your age" and "All the girls should love you, trust me."

I tried various products, but discovered that Oxy cream worked best. It had 10% Benzoyl Peroxide, as effective as the silicon balls in shoe boxes for drying up moisture, while most others had only 2% Salicylic acid, which burned on application and vanished by morning. I used Oxy sparingly at first, but

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my face grew used to the drying effect and rebelled, lubing my face with pools of oil. I fought back by thickening the cream, which turned my glands into geysers. After a year of using Oxy, I began a routine where I finished off a tube in two weeks that was meant to last more than six months. What I didn't know was the fine print on the back mentioned the chemicals made my skin absorb triple the amount of ultraviolet rays, and during P.E. and pick-up basketball games on the tennis courts the sun irreparably scorched my face.

My father monitored this progress from acne to sunburn with as much attention as he could while working sixty hours a week and devoting time to his other four children. When he did speak to me, it was usually to tell me that I was looking much better, that it had obviously improved, and tailgating these pep talks came inquires about girls, which ones I liked, which ones might like me. While I talked to him I'd sometimes finger or pick at my face without realizing it, and he'd gently tell me to stop, and ask another leading question about a particular girl.

I had a crush on a girl, the same girl for all four years of high school, a girl who rarely talked to me and never would identify herself with me. One day in class, we had the good fortune to be placed in a two-person study group. We were discussing a math problem when she looked into my face, and said, "I never noticed you had a dimple before." I indicated my surprise as well. My chin is practically cleft in two, with a round valley in the middle—you could miss it only by never looking. We continued with the assignment, and after class, in the bathroom, I realized why she chose that moment to notice the dimple: right in the middle of the cleft stood a white-capped Himalayan pimple.

When I slunk home that night, my mother, in an attempt to console me, made me hot chocolate and related an anecdote. A few months after she first married my father, she said, he developed a huge whitehead on his back. It was round as a quarter and protruded high as a dime on end. She popped it multiple times, but couldn't get down deep enough to fully exhume it. She tried not only her fingernails, but her palms, pressing them together as tightly as she could. After several weeks of this futile popping followed by the pimple's reemergence, my father reached back and squeezed as hard as he could with his forefinger and thumb, and from deep inside his skin shot out hard pasty kernels, surrounded by a soft white cream.

Although my parents were responsible about locked doors and appropriate places for conducting their sexual trysts, which meant I never interrupted them in the flagrant act, this story vicariously served to accomplish a similar trauma on many levels. One: my mother explicitly detailing how she attended to my father's bodily needs. Two: My father, with great effort, spurting a white creamy substance. Three: That it was now clear that my Oedipal-inspired mother had transferred her pimple-fetish attention from my father to me. Four: That my Mother thought this story would make me feel better about my high-school crush noticing a nipple-sized zit on my chin.

In my adult life, at the age of 26, I was dating a woman, and the relationship had grown serious. Somehow in the course of our talks, I had learned that she also had a problem with acne in her adolescence, continuing up until her late twenties. She had to obtain prescription medicine, one of the strongest available, to curb her outbreaks. A month or so after this discussion, I was massaging her back when I noticed a whitehead on her shoulder blade. The immediate impulse was to pop it. I resisted, because pimple popping is more intimate than sex, and we were not having sex. A week later, I was massaging her again as she lay face down, when I noticed the same zit. "I'm going to pop it," I told her, feeling an irresistible force channeling me. She protested. I defended. She protested with more virulence. I ignored her and popped it.

I don't know why she didn't spurn me for a sensitive, metrosexual companion who would have grown queasy at the word zit, instead choosing a few months later to tell me she loved me and to talk of marriage, but that experience did reveal how little I've changed in my attitude toward bodies since my adolescent years. Although I've overcome the genes bestowed from my father, the behavior I learned from my mother has only become more entrenched.

Not long later, the woman I was dating became my wife. When we dreamed of the future, I could already imagine our children's oily faces and their accusatory fingers aimed at our pores. Yes, we'll tell them, those are our genes. And we're sorry that we united in matrimony with another person possessing overproducing glands.

After this apology, despite all reason, proper sense, sensible hygiene, scientific conviction and proper father/children relationships, my training will take control and I will back them against the refrigerator while clutching Kleenex, my eyes lighting up, and show them how to care for their face.

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