

Gimme Some Skin

By Jean Shriver

Can you name your largest organ? Or define the “soft outer covering of vertebrates”? If you answered skin, you're right. Did you also know that skin's main function is “guarding our bones, muscles, ligaments and internal organs”? I am a person whose skin performs that essential task, but in all other respects the relationship between me and my outer covering could be summed up in one word --- trouble, trouble, trouble.

From my cradle on, I was plagued with bites. Do you know there's usually one person per household whose flesh is incredibly enticing to pests? I found that out when our old dog died and his ten thousand homeless fleas all made a beeline for me --- not my husband, not my three children--- just me. I looked like I had leg measles. The doctor said I was “mosquito and flea bait” which explains my baby pictures. An adorable curly headed tot covered in Band-aids to stop her from scratching mosquito bites.

Growing up, I think you'd say I was “comfortable in my own skin.” a confident, extroverted and outspoken kid.. If only my skin had been comfortable with me. It kept giving me problems. Not the usual teenage zits and acne. No, I was cursed with an itchy scalp that drove me crazy. While my classmates peered into mirrors, dabbing white stuff on red spots, I sat in a cigar scented dermatology office having radiation beamed onto the top of my head. I endured months of deadly rays focused just above my brains. Ye gods, it's a wonder I have any left....or maybe I don't.

Finally my mother got nervous about the radiation and took me to another dermatologist. This one was a doozy. He made my mother rub tar ointment into my scalp every other night and wash it out with raw egg on the alternate nights. On the tar days, I smelled like a road. On alternate days, when we forgot to monitor the water temperature, my long curly hair ended up a tangled mess of scrambled eggs. What's a mere pimple compared to that?

When I turned sixteen, my scalp problems finally abated. To celebrate I joined my friends sunbathing on beaches and around pools, all of us armed with bottles of baby oil laced with iodine. The others turned the color of peanut butter or coffee with cream. I turned peony red before my outer epidermis peeled off in large sheets. Stubbornly, I kept exposing my Scotch Irish pelt to more rays of the sun than were ever beamed on those misty isles. Who knew I was setting myself up for a lifetime of dermatology appointments?

Doctors looked at me sadly, “You should never have come to California,” they'd opine. I'd shrug. Too late for that. “And having come,” they'd continue, “you should have stayed indoors.” Fat chance with three beach loving kids and a husband with a sailboat. And gee, I did dab on some sunblock when I remembered. In the long run, I'm the patient who proves the saying, “Dermatology patients never die and never get well.” I should have lived back when women wore long gloves and carried parasols. Bet Scarlett O'Hara never had things zapped off her porcelain exterior. Me, I just spent two

miserable weeks smearing ointment on my face so it would break out, swell and itch. Leaving me looking, in the words of William Congreve, like “an old peeled wall.” A brick one.

For my next life, I've ordered an entirely different shade of birthday suit --- terra cotta maybe, or amber. Olive would be nice. Anything but this itchy, scratchy white stuff.

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