

Skin Deep

By Shaun Hunter

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Two photographs belong together. In one, my maternal grandmother Berniece sits at my wedding reception. Her small body hunches over the banquet table, one elbow planted on the white tablecloth, chin cupped in her hand, lips thin and tight. Her stubby forefinger taps a cigarette over a glass ashtray, her dark brown eyes are brooding. What is it this time? Is the dinner not to her liking? Does she feel excluded from the celebration? Or is she just being her usual critical self? The pose is classic Berniece, a woman as unyielding as the thick-shelled Brazil nuts she liked to crack open at Christmas.

The second photograph is of me, ten years after my wedding day. I'm seated sideways on a piano bench, supervising my eight-year-old son's violin practice. My shoulders curve forward, fist clenched around a coffee mug. My lips form a thin line, my eyes narrow with the effort of scrutiny, steeling myself as he drags the bow across the strings.

People say the camera doesn't lie.



You look like your father's side of the family, Berniece used to tell me. I wondered why it mattered. She sounded like one of the girls in my junior high gym class choosing members for her team. I pretended not to feel the sting of exclusion. Later, when I watched her grow old and difficult, I clung to her pronouncement: I didn't look like Berniece; I wouldn't end up like her. But now, I lean into the bathroom mirror and see *her* face staring back at me – the same vertical grooves of disappointment forming between my eyebrows, her frown lines etching themselves around my mouth, her exacting gaze permeating mine.

My grandmother compiled scrapbooks – four homely albums that recorded the story of her life – and now, I'm making a scrapbook, too. I paste evidence and artefacts onto its wide empty pages, trying to understand the way Berniece's life is tangled up with mine.



One summer, my sister and I watched our mother do battle with an infestation of houseflies at our family cabin. We were grown women with children of our own, but we lounged on the couch like teenage girls. Fly carcasses were everywhere – piled on the windowsills, crunching underfoot. Live flies, dopey with heat, dropped from the ceiling into our hair. With a fly-swatter in one hand and Dustbuster in the other, our mother pounced, her compact limbs like springs. *Berniece*, we snickered under our breath. In her day, our grandmother stalked flies in her cotton muumuu and knee-hi nylons, her fingers clutching a wad of Scotties tissue, backups tucked under her bra strap.

Our mother isn't Berniece, but when she gets an idea in her head about the precise way one of her plans will unfold, when the muscles around her mouth become taut and the sound of her voice turns to steel, we whisper, *Berniece*. When she launches into one of her stories that ends with the resounding note of certainty about how the world works, we breathe, *Berniece*. That summer, on the drive back to the city, my sister and I made a pact: if we saw each other turning into our

grandmother, we'd say so. We were so clever, spotting our mother's hereditary flaws. We were convinced that DNA weakened with time, that our mother would absorb Berniece's undiluted inheritance, not us. We believed our pact would protect us like magic dust in a fairy tale.

We were wrong. Berniece's legacy has infested me like houseflies homing into the crevices of a log cabin. I feel her inside me when I clean my house, annoyed at other people's messes and insistent that things be *just so*. I sense her inside my marriage, when the word *no* forms on my lips before my husband has finished uttering a suggestion. I notice her when I hover over my children as they do their homework and practice their music, pushing them to do no less than their very best, measuring their efforts against my high, unwavering expectations.

On my wedding day, I had no idea things would turn out this way. I swept by Berniece in my satin ballet flats and my waltz-length wedding dress convinced the breeze of my life would disturb the coarse curls of her graying hair. Twenty-five years old, I danced around my grandmother as if I were free.

Now, I can no longer tell where I end and Berniece begins.



Music lessons. My son and I are like wrestlers locked in a death grip over the violin. The lesson today ends the way they all do: my son escapes from the airless studio in the church basement and races into the common area where his little sister is waiting. But this time, as I put his violin away in its case, his teacher asks me to stay, and shuts the door. Her Japanese intonation cuts her words into hard, precise bites.

“That boy is stubborn. If he doesn't listen to me, what can I do?”

I murmur agreement. My son *is* pig-headed. He doesn't listen to me, either. At first, playing the violin was fun. He was a musical toddler, drumming on upside-down sand pails and turning tennis rackets into guitars. At six, he carried home his first violin. I remember the way he lifted the quarter-sized instrument out of the velvet lining of its case as if it were a treasured object, the way he beamed the first time he played a simple rhythm with his rosined bow, the ruddy concentration on his face when he stood up in front of a room full of people and played *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. Could I have dreamt those memories?

I get up to leave the studio, repeating my impossible pledge to the teacher that we'll do better next time. I turn the handle on the studio door and push, but there is something blocking the way. I jiggle the knob, push harder.

Behind me, the teacher's voice is shrill, alarmed. "What's going on?"

I lean my shoulder into the door and force it open. An upholstered room divider obstructs the way. My son has barricaded us into the studio.

On the drive home, my fingers grip the steering wheel and my jaw clenches. I loathe violin lessons as much as my son does, but I'm in too deep. I can't let go. A phrase runs like a steel rod through my mind. *There will be no quitting*. Berniece's words, in my mother's mouth, and now mine. I'm trapped, paralyzed. I despise what I have become.



When I was a girl, I used to pass the time walking to school by doing simple calculations. How many steps from here to the traffic lights? How many years until I graduate from high school? How old will I be in the new millennium? The last one made my head hurt. I could do the math – I'd turn forty in 2001 – but I couldn't picture myself that far into the future. It was like thinking about *pi*, or God. I never

imagined that a few months after I toasted the new century, on the eve of my fortieth birthday, I would realize for the first time that I was going to die.



The mole above my left elbow was small, the diameter of a pencil eraser or a piece of confetti. I had watched it turn from light to dark brown, from freckle-flat to bumpy, but I let it drift into my peripheral vision. One day, I'd get it checked out, but right now, I was too busy. If I ignored it, the mole would go away. I believed, as I had all my life, that I was different, special, exempt.

My doctor delivered the diagnosis in a somber, hushed voice, pronouncing the words as if they were diseased. Malignant melanoma.



As a child, I ran barefoot and bare-skinned in the summer sun. My nose, shoulders and forearms burned, peeled and freckled before they turned nut-brown. As a teenager, I basted myself with Johnson's Baby Oil, rotating every fifteen minutes to promote even grilling. A surefire recipe for beauty and boyfriends.

The ancient Greeks called melanoma the black cancer, and the description still fits. No pink ribbons, no fundraising walks, no sisterhood of suffering and survival on parade. Skin cancer doesn't hide inside you, it sits out in the open, the lesions blackening and blistering for all the world to see. It's a dirty kind of cancer, tainted with culpability and shame. Like lung cancer. A disease you might have prevented if you'd stopped smoking, stayed out of the sun. A death you brought on yourself.

I rummage through my files and find the brochure I picked up at the doctor's office all those years ago.

Cancer is a disease that starts in our cells... Genes inside each cell order it to grow, work, reproduce and die... Sometimes a cell's instructions get mixed up and it behaves abnormally. Eventually, groups of abnormal cells form lumps or tumours... Malignant tumour cells are able to invade the tissues around them and spread to other parts of the body.

I work my scissors around the relevant passage, then hesitate. The comparison is perhaps too neat, too extreme, I think as I run my glue stick over the back of the clipping and paste it in my scrapbook.

Malignant tumours can be dangerous, the brochure says. It is important to find them, and treat them quickly, before they spread.



The melanoma was removed from my arm with sharp, sterile surgical instruments, the four-inch incision sewn up with stiff black stitches. A few weeks later, a radiologist injected radioactive dye into the scar tissue, used a gamma-ray camera to see if the cancer had spread to the lymphatic system, and marked the relevant nodes on the soft flesh of my armpit with a Sharpie pen. A surgeon cut a tiny slit in my armpit and extricated the sentinel lymph nodes. Pathologists examined the biopsied tissue from my body under high-powered microscopes. Technicians x-rayed my lungs. Doctors scoured my skin – from the pale epidermis of my scalp to the crevices between my toes – and probed the lymphatic tissue deep in my neck and hips. They told me they were 99 percent sure they had removed the cancerous cells.

Once my pathology results came back clear, I decided to change my life. I posted cheerful reminders around my desk. *Laugh more! Lighten up!* Every week, I roamed the aisles of the health food store, filling my cart with organic produce, green tea and raw nuts – micronutrients

that would help me rebuild myself cell by cell. I lost myself in the parallel universe of the vitamin aisle. I studied magazines called *Awake* and *Synchronicity*, learning the heady language of recovery. I had long, tearful sessions with a homeopath and dissolved tiny white granules of energetic medicine under my tongue. I took up Tai Chi.

For the first time, I visited the self-help bookstore I had always avoided. Fighting my aversion to the smell of incense, I lingered among the shelves. Every book seemed to be telling me the same thing: *You have the power to change*. I bought a book that promised creative recovery and worked my way through its twelve-week program. Every morning, after the school bus rumbled down the street ferrying my children away, I'd pull out a fresh sheaf of foolscap from my children's school supplies and start to write. In mid-paragraph, I'd flex my left arm and feel the tug of the fresh scar above my elbow. A line from a childhood story ran in a loop through my head. *I think I can, I think I can*. Transformation was about willpower and discipline. I was chugging up the steep hill of myself, convinced that it was my fault I'd fallen into the dead-end of my grandmother's legacy, and that this time, I could and would leave her behind.



I paste into my scrapbook a diagram of a cross-section of human skin, an intricate, subterranean landscape of vessels and glands, fibers and follicles. The skin, the explanatory text says, is in motion. Daughter cells make their way up to the surface to replace the dead cells of the epidermis in a miniature life cycle that takes twenty-seven days to complete. The journey of my malignant mole was longer, starting perhaps as a childhood sunburn, decades ago. The melanoma was no thicker than a penny but it had penetrated the four strata of my epidermis, the papillary and reticular layers below, and finally the deep dermis underneath.

Beauty is only skin deep. The saying suggests that our more valuable, essential qualities lie out of sight, beneath the thin surface of the skin.

The phrase must have come from a time before high-powered microscopes.

As I turn the first pages of my scrapbook, I think of the doctors' tools and tests, their steady hands, their protocols, their confident statistics. I covet their x-ray vision and tracking dyes that light up the dark interior of the body like phosphorescence. When it comes to prying myself loose from my grandmother's legacy, I have none of their expertise, or their cool science. I am on my own with a lump of memories, a stack of blank pages, and a pencil that moves across the paper making the steady, scraping sound of excavation.

Shaun Hunter's personal essays have been published in anthologies, literary magazines and The Globe and Mail. She has recently completed a book-length work of narrative non-fiction called Under the Skin. Shaun lives and writes in Calgary.

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