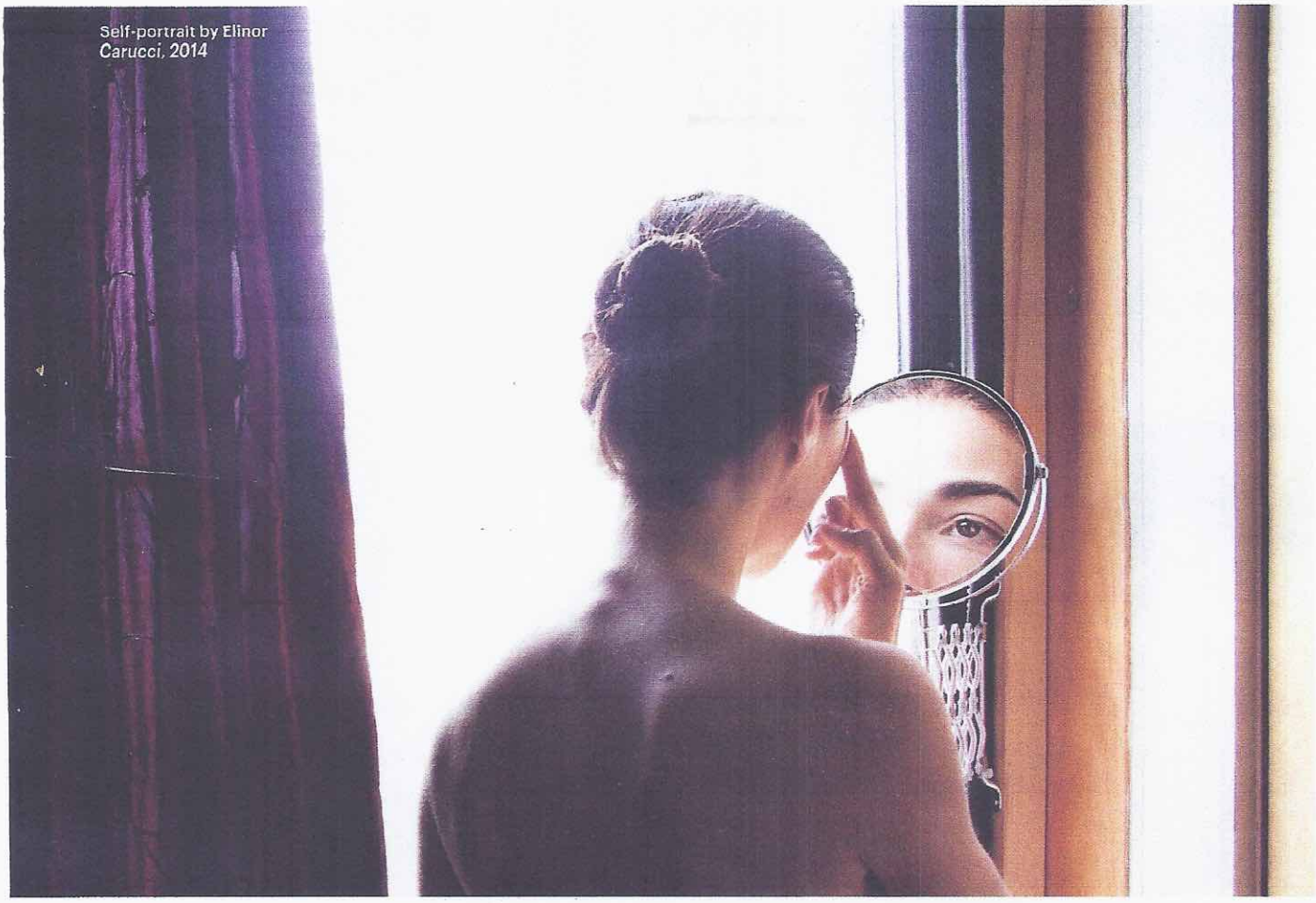


Self-portrait by Elinor Carucci, 2014

Battle Scars

A story, a memory, a badge of honor—a scar is more than an imperfection to be corrected. One woman decides whether or not she can live without hers.

By Hana Schank

The conversation had started innocently enough, but it had shifted abruptly to Botox, as conversations among women tend to do. I was having coffee with two friends on a sunny morning when someone made an offhand comment about someone using too much Botox, and then someone else said she was thinking about getting Botox, and then before I knew it, two weeks had passed, and I was sitting on the exam table in a dermatologist's shiny office for a consultation.

"I don't need to look 23," I said to the doctor. "I just don't want to look angry."

The doctor was either in his 30s or possibly 70. Which is to say he looked like someone who had benefited from either a little or a lot of his own handiwork.

"I get it," he said, peering at my face under a harsh light.

"So we could definitely do something about the lines here," he said, gesturing to the two scowl marks etched between my eyebrows. "And I'm seeing some puffiness below this eye."

"Oh," I laughed. "That's my scar. I've had it forever."

"Well," he said. "We could easily smooth that out."

Up until that moment I had never considered my scar to be a flaw. I'd earned it in preschool when I'd attempted to do a backflip off of a table and had instead landed on my face. In my defense, the preschool had a room called the Bouncing Room that was covered in mats and existed for the express purpose of giving children an opportunity to jump off of things. The only explanation I can provide for why the preschool thought it was a good idea to put a hard wooden table in the Bouncing Room is that it was the '70s, a time when people were only

EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY

just coming around to the idea of seat belts. Bike helmets, nonflammable pajamas, and playgrounds made of a material other than metal were all still exciting innovations that lay in the future.

I must have moved my face away from the doctor's gaze because he abruptly sat back and looked at me.

"Of course, you've lived with it for a long time, so maybe it's not something you're looking to remove."

"I don't know," I said. "I'd have to think about it."

I left the office with a long list of recommendations for things I could do to my face, then went home and stared at my scar in the mirror. It had gotten puffier over the years. When I was a child, it had only shown up when I smiled, a secret from my preschool years that I alone knew the meaning behind. But recently I'd been noticing it more in photographs. What had once been just a dimple-like fold under my eye now gave me more of a lopsided look. And others had noticed, too.

"Did you bump into something?" my brother had asked me a few months earlier, pointing at my eye.

"Yeah," I said. "Thirty-eight years ago."

I should add here that my brother is perhaps one of the least observant people I know when it comes to things like dimples and faces. So if he was noticing it, maybe it was time to do something about it.

On the other hand, I'd always kind of loved my scar. I liked the reminder that once I was a child who thought she could do anything she dreamed up, including a backflip off of a table. I don't know why I thought a backflip was within the range of physical things I could execute, other than the fact that no one had ever told me I couldn't do one. Getting the scar was one of my earliest memories. I still remember picturing myself doing the backflip, announcing that I would perform one to my classmates, the feeling of launching myself in the air, and then the thud of colliding with the wooden table edge. My next memory is not of pain or fear but of how special I felt sitting next to the teacher while she put ice in a bag for me.

"The doctor said you'd have that scar for the rest of your life," my mother said over the phone when I mentioned my visit to the dermatologist.

"Guess he couldn't predict Botox," I replied.

There was something scary about how easily I could erase something that was supposed to be with me for the rest of my life, how quickly I could become someone who had never had an accident with a table.

And this is where I need to fess up: This is not my first time at the cosmetic-enhancement rodeo. Back when I was 17, I did what a lot of Jewish girls did and, as it was referred to, "got my nose fixed," a phrasing that implied there was something inherently defective about one's nose. There had been a lot of back and forth about the situation with my nose, and ultimately I'd decided to get the surgery because it felt like everyone—my friends, my parents, my doctor—thought I should. And if everyone was spending that much time thinking about my nose, I reasoned, there must have been something really wrong with it.

I'll never know if I made the right decision because I'll never know what it would have been like to go through life with my old nose. I do know that I wish I'd given it more time. I wish I'd ended up being the type of person who could embrace her differences rather than going under the knife to remove her single most noticeable physical characteristic. But I also know that before the surgery, I spent countless hours thinking about my nose. And that other people thought about my nose. After the surgery, one of my friends from high school told me that Ted Lipinski—not the jerk's real name—had announced to the entire eleventh-grade studio-art class, as they drew profile portraits, that I had the biggest nose in the whole school. But since the surgery, I have barely given my nose a second thought. (I have, however, thought about finding Ted Lipinski and punching him.)

And so with my scar, here is a second chance to embrace who I am—scars, "fixed" nose, and all. I want to be better than my 17-year-old self, to have matured into the kind of woman who finds that with age comes acceptance. I want to be Joni Mitchell and Diane Keaton, but it sometimes feels like aspiring to Joni Mitchell–level acceptance is like aspiring to work for Doctors Without Borders: I'd like to fly around the world and save lives, but I also want to take hot showers, sleep under a duvet, and not get dysentery. Even so, at this point in my life, I should know what kind of person I'm capable of being.

HERE IS A SECOND CHANCE TO EMBRACE WHO I AM—SCARS, "FIXED" NOSE, AND ALL.

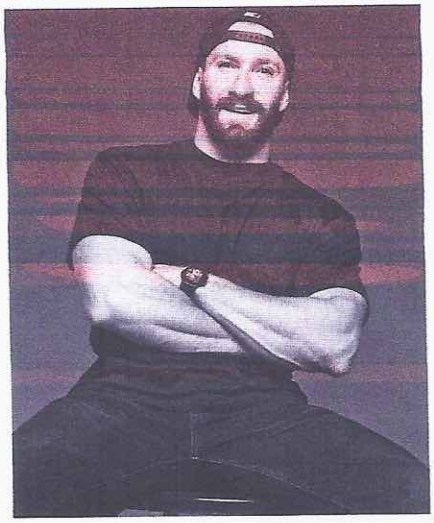
And to make matters more complicated, chasing acceptance is like pursuing a moving target. If I were presented with the same face I had at 17, I like to believe that by now, over 30 years later, I would have learned to accept it. The problem is that my face is ever-changing. With each passing day my scar gets minutely more pronounced; each glance in the mirror is a new challenge to be happy with the face looking back at me, a face that is not quite the same as the one that was there yesterday.

So maybe here is a second chance to weigh my options, without the pressure of being 17, and decide rationally, and with the wisdom of age, that I'd simply rather not have a squinty left eye. Maybe this is an opportunity to choose cosmetic enhancement without anyone else's input, to be the kind of person who has a scar removed for all the right reasons: I have better things to do than spend time worrying about smiling in pictures, I have interesting and important things to say, and when I'm at a cocktail party or a dinner I don't want other people to be paying more attention to my scar than the words that are coming out of my mouth.

I'd like to say that the decision is easier to make now than it was when I was a teenager, but the truth is that it's not, because I have conflicting goals: I want to have the face I've come through life with but also one that doesn't leave people wondering if I recently ran into a doorjamb. And I can't have both.

A few weeks ago, I called to make the appointment, only to cancel it a week later. I look in the mirror and picture my scar-free face, and it both thrills me and terrifies me. I'd prefer to see a smooth, unpuffy face looking back at me, but I also want to see my own face looking back. And for now, that face includes a well-earned scar. ◆

Contributors

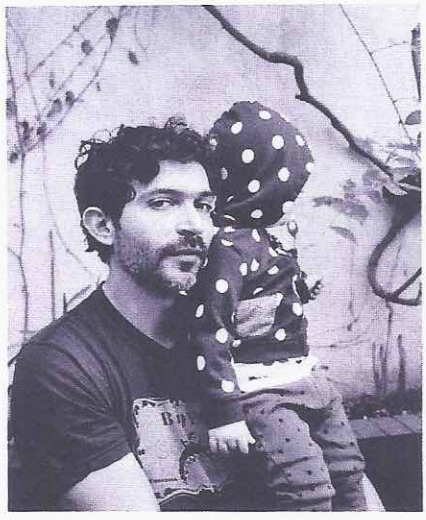


GIAMPAOLO SGURA

To set the tone of personal expression for the fashion story "Head Strong," Sgura took to the sidewalks of New York City. "If we had shot in a studio, the photographs would have just been clothes," he says. "But out on the streets, we can bring the fashion to life and show a personality on each woman." The two Great Danes on the set also showed their personalities. "They were going crazy," says the photographer. When one slipped away from a model, *Allure*'s fashion director, Siobhan Bonnouvrier, quickly pounced, grabbing its leash before it could escape.

HANA SCHANK

Schank explains her temptation to fix a mark on her forehead in "Battle Scars." "I also have a scar on my knee from a surgery a few years ago, and I would never get it removed because I went through so much for it," says Schank. "But the one I have on my face, that's different. I just feel like it makes me look tired." Still, she notes, "Padma Lakshmi has a scar from a childhood accident that she chooses not to cover up. And there's Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride*! The scars on his face are almost like warrior markings." Her memoir "The Edge of Normal" is available as a Kindle Single.



HORACIO SALINAS

Photographer Salinas is a master at manipulating everyday objects to create surprising and energetic still lifes. But for "Splash!," he had little to work with. Skin essences "look just like water," he explains. "So the challenge was how to show water in an interesting way." He captured the liquid falling into a pool, and "for the light source, I projected an image I drew of a woman's face onto it." Salinas held his camera in one hand while squeezing soaked makeup sponges with the other. "The technique was old-school, but I got just the right effect," he says.

JENNA ROSENSTEIN

"When I was reporting an article about sun and skin, I discovered that there's a trend of college students getting free access to tanning beds," says Rosenstein. While researching "Harsh Light" for this issue, the *Allure* beauty writer learned that "indoor tanning is a touchy subject that brings up the question of free enterprise," she says. "But between the campaigns, legislation, and the surgeon general's call to action to prevent skin cancer, I think attitudes about tanning beds are changing, and I wanted to capture that moment."

COURTESY