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Shingles

Before my ex-husband and I got married, we considered buying a house. Randy wanted to stay in Berkeley. Although I liked walking to class with latte in hand, I preferred San Francisco. Buying in Berkeley implied a commitment I was unwilling to keep. In the end, I won that battle, and we moved to San Francisco a few months before our wedding there. Our break-up seven years later transitioned from trial separation to permanent condition when Randy moved back to Berkeley.

In those weeks we looked at Berkeley houses, the divergence between our tastes was depressing. I liked best the shaker shingle A-frames. Randy's priority was geeked-out modernity, and above all he loathed shingles. This aversion had a practical angle, as everything about Randy's affinities did (shingles require maintenance, are vulnerable to wind, rain, dry rot), but was so entrenched that I couldn't avoid seeing it as an aesthetic stance. Shingles affronted him. I looked at shingles and saw the doll house that my sister had as a child, sheets of origami paper glued onto the walls; Randy saw dragon scales.

The only house we agreed on was built by an aeronautic engineer and looked like the plaster hull of a ship. After touring it, we danced on its scallop of a balcony. It wasn't until we looked at the brochure more carefully that we realized we couldn't afford it: somehow we had both mentally deleted the "1" in the price, and the house we thought miraculously cost \$330,000 was a million dollars more. We walked out laughing but dejected. The intersection of our tastes seemed impossibly precise, a sign of deeper divergences.

He put his foot down about shingles, I won on cities: we moved to San Francisco.

Three weeks before our wedding in 1995, something he thought was a spider bite appeared on the left side of Randy's torso. It looked

like a blister. The pain was spokes radiating from a hub. An 80-year-old dermatologist with a sloping, *American Gothic* forehead diagnosed shingles. At that time, Randy was 28. Nothing about him fit the shingles profile. “But you’re about to get married,” the doctor nodded, and informed us that stress was a trigger for shingles. Something about the amalgamated quality of our laughter, the nervousness threaded through it, reminded me of leaving that thick-walled, creamy house we couldn’t afford. Was he getting shingles because he didn’t want to marry me? Fortunately, it was a mild outbreak. By the time we got married, it felt like a push-pin in his side.

My own round with shingles came 14 years later, long after we had divorced. I didn’t fit the shingles profile, either, and it took three trips to diagnose it. The first doctor thought I had an outer ear infection and prescribed antibiotics. The next day the pain was much worse. In my GP’s office, I threw up in a plastic bowl. Inner ear infection, he decided, the nausea vertigo related. My husband Bryan and I were looking forward to our first kid-free vacation since our children were born (our oldest was three, our youngest 14 months). I cried when my doctor told me that I might not be able to fly the following week. The pain was so intense that night I couldn’t sleep. When I saw my face in the mirror I hardly recognized myself, it was so swollen and blistered. At first light, I took the bus to the ER by myself—it didn’t seem worth packing the girls in their car seats. This time, the ER doctor took one look at me and said, “Shingles.” Only then did I remember Randy’s surprise at the sharpness of the pain of his “spider bite”: the radial spokes, the wheel of fire.

I was in the hospital for three days. My husband slept next to me on a fold-out cot while my mother looked after our girls. I slept, too, muffled in morphine. In lucid moments I was reminded of our stays in the hospital when our daughters were born. Then, like now, Bryan would reach across from his fold-out cot to my cumbersome, gadgety bed to grip my hand.

They tested me for everything because I didn’t fit the shingles profile. Lupus, HIV, Lyme disease: I didn’t have any of it. When Bryan first brought the girls to visit, the doctor laughed and said, “Oh, young children, that explains it.”

Stress, again. The people we love making us sick, triggering these burning marks?

I stayed behind while Bryan went to New Orleans with our daughters. The baby wailed the whole plane trip. I had to wean her abruptly because of all the medications I was taking: steroids, antivirals, Vicodin. Bryan offered to cancel his trip, but I wanted them gone. I needed to be away from my daughters precisely because they needed me, especially my baffled, wordless baby. I clocked time by the pills in their yellow pharmacy bottles.

Shingles are caused by the same herpes zoster virus that causes chicken pox. Only those who have had chicken pox get them. After a chicken pox outbreak, the virus goes dormant in one's spine and reactivates as shingles. Usually it strikes older people (the vaccine is limited to those aged 60 and up), but it can be triggered by any compromise to the immune system: a serious disease or a bad cold; exhaustion, stress; weddings, divorce, babies.

Later my shingles skipped over from the trigeminal nerve, just starting to recover, to the seventh cranial nerve that controls the muscles on the left side of the face. Consequently, I had Bell's Palsy. I looked like I'd had a stroke. My mouth went slack, my left eye wouldn't shut. At night, Bryan helped smear goo in my eye before we sealed it with a patch. "Pirate," he called me. My mother, when she saw me, told the story of my little sister's operation for her wandering eye when Hilary was six months old. Afterwards, Hilary would sit in the front of the grocery cart, a patch on her eye, her pigeon-toed legs in braces. "Old ladies in the checkout line would look at her and cry," my mother said, studying my face.

Shingles attacks one nerve, and every time it returns (once you've had shingles, you are susceptible to recurrence), it attacks the same nerve. Having it on two nerves was unusual enough that I received an MRI to check for a brain stem tumor. "Just being cautious," the neurologist told me. She was my age and maternal.

My older daughter thought the Bell's made me look like I was half happy, half sad. Years later she said, "Do you remember when you had blueberries on your face?"

So unusual, supposedly, to get shingles at 41, but when I posted on Facebook about my outbreak ("Will steroids improve my swing?"),

many friends wrote in with their own non-standard reports of shingles. One of those friends was my ex-husband, who reminded me that steroids would unsettle my stomach and that yogurt would help. Though I had forgotten this, I remembered, immediately, Randy's bony hand, the hovering spoon.

It's been six years since I had shingles, but I dread them returning and know they will. When I am stressed or anxious, sad or tired, when my daughter says, "Go away," when I have too much work, when I hear bad news, I feel electricity travel along my trigeminal nerve. It is permanently damaged, and not in the sense that I had always imagined nerves being damaged (numb and dead). Rather, it's hyper-active. I could draw with a pen on my face exactly where that nerve is, all its capillary branches.

Once when I was 22 and needed money, I signed up with a boyfriend for a study to test a sea sickness medicine. They gave half of us placebos, half the medicine, and took us out on the bay, steering against the waves, trying to make the placebo-takers sick. Poor Will spent the day throwing up over the side of the boat, but I had clearly gotten the medicine. When the lab techs would make their hourly rounds to ask how we were feeling, I never claimed more than "awareness." The scale was 0 (perfectly fine), 1 (stomach awareness), 2 (mild nausea), building to 6, heaving over the side of the boat. (They didn't have to survey Will: the vomiting spoke for itself.) "Remember the day we did that crazy study?" I asked him recently when we ran into each other. He beamed. "Yes! That was a great day!" I stared to confirm he wasn't being sarcastic.

As an English professor, I obsess over etymologies: *decide*, for instance, has the same root as *homicide* or *suicide*, meaning to cut or kill. I've always been intrigued by the implications, which suggest that making a decision is not a positive act of selection, but instead a form of slaughter. So I find myself wondering why *shingles*, what the disease has to do with those overlapping wooden scales.

I imagine my shingles like a film strip, pleated so the images overlap. The same virus hits us as children and then again, much more brutally, when our immune systems are "compromised" (the verb my doctors kept using). I consider the way shingles opportunely returns or threatens to return, always to the same site; the baby wearing an eye patch, then the mother of a baby, and my own mother connecting the

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two; the way hearing a song that my ex-husband put on a tape more than 20 years ago makes current flow along my tricky nerve. It's not pain, exactly: it's something more like awareness.

