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SKIN CRAFT

MARCIA MEIER

MEIER CHILD, 5, HURT CRITICALLY: STRUCK WHILE ON BIKE

The daughter of a Muskegon businessman and a well-known North Muskegon man were seriously injured in separate accidents today as the county moved off to a grim start on the last weekend before summer officially begins.

Critically hurt when her small two-wheel bicycle was struck by a car at Fourth Street and Mason Avenue about 10:30 a.m. today, Marcia K. Meier, 5, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Robert B. Meier, 1291 Fourth Street, is in 'poor' condition at Mercy Hospital. Mr. Meier is an officer of Meier Cleaners, Inc.

Attendants said the left side of her face was severely lacerated in the accident. She faces surgery, hospital aides said. The girl suffered no fractures.

Muskegon Patrolmen Eugene Beckman and George Wilder said Marcia was struck by a south-bound car operated by Roscoe C. Benn, 67, of 1638 Division St., as she attempted to cross the street in the path of the vehicle.

—**The Muskegon Chronicle**, June 17, 1961

I wake and I can't see. My face itches. My ears itch. I am desperate to scratch my ears. I can't move my arms! Why can't I move my arms?

My mom's voice comes to me. Soothingly, I hear her say: "It's okay, Marcia. It's for your own good."

It was the beginning of fifteen years of surgeries, scars, teasing, and struggle. I was five years old, and had been dragged by the car for more than 200 feet down the block. I lost my left cheek and eyelid, and it was only because of a quirk of fate that the surgeon who would recreate my face was in the hospital when I was brought in by ambulance. There were four surgeries in the five weeks I was in the hospital the first time. My father kept all the surgeon's notes for me, and presented them to me just before I married at age twenty-six.

July 6, 1961 - Surgeon's notes:

Patient—a five-year-old girl—presented in the emergency room on June 17 with severe lacerations and subdermal abrasions on the left side of the face and upper chest. Primary concern was stanching blood loss and saving the left eye. Emergency closure of facial wound required pulling together tissue from both sides of the cheek. Pressure bandages applied. Loss of upper left eyelid and portion of lower left lid required fashioning of tarsorrhaphy to protect the eye.

I am lying in my hospital crib. Dr. Richard Kislov and several nurses surround me, and the doctor is peeling away the dressing on my cheek and eyelid. Gauze sticks to my cheek. He pries it, loosening it with water, slowly pulling it away, moment by moment. My skin holds tight. I want to cry, but the nurses hold my arms close to my chest and one says: "Stay still, stay very still." I do not want to stay still. I want to push them away from my face. But the nurses hold me tight. I cannot move. So I cry. But I cry with my mouth closed, my lips pursed and my breath held, because that is the way Dr. Kislov wants it.

Nov. 29, 1961 - Surgeon's notes:

Reconstruction of left upper eyelid by Hughes procedure, release of ectropion of the lower eyelid, repair of the resulting defect by covering with full-thickness skin graft from upper chest.

Mom carries my small pink suitcase into my room. Surgery is scheduled for the next morning, and she cannot stay with me. A nurse helps me into a hospital gown and boosts me into a tall steel-sided crib. And I cry when Mom walks down the hallway to the elevator.

In the morning, they come with shots to relax and calm me. No food, no water. I become woozy, my body covered with a thin, scratchy blanket.

Mom arrives. Then they come for me, the masked ones from the OR, with green scrubs and caps on their heads. I scoot from the crib, moving my bottom and then my upper body over to the cold, flat gurney.

Mom holds my hand as we roll down the hallways and into the elevators, then down more fluorescent white hallways to the operating room. When we reach the big double doors beyond which she cannot come, I hear her say, "I'll be here when you get back. Love you." And she lets me go.

One of the surgical nurses, Anne, seems to glow in her mask and green cap, bathed in light from behind. She holds my hand and pats me soothingly, saying, "It's okay. Don't cry; it's going to be all right."

Dr. Kislov comes in and I see he is smiling behind his mask. I am good at reading his face behind the cloth. I know when he is scowling, or perplexed, or exasperated if something isn't working the way he wants it to. I can sense his pursed lips when his eyebrows knit together, and know he is concentrating on a particular problem. When he smiles, it stretches the mask and I feel as if I have done something extraordinary, something worthwhile. It makes me happy, even in my terror. His hair is caught up in a boxy green cap tied at the back, and his horn-rimmed glasses reflect my small, frightened face back to me.

It is only a few minutes before he nods to the anesthesiologist and gives me a pat on the arm. “Okay, Marcia,” he says in his thick German accent, “we’ll see you shortly, eh?”

When I awaken, I throw up. I smell the sickly-sweet aroma of the ether. My eyes are bandaged—I don’t know where I am. My hands are tethered to the bedside bars. A nurse is nearby. She murmurs some reassuring words, words meant to calm me, but they only make me more anxious.

Where am I? Why can’t I see?

Where is my mom?

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Every day for five weeks she came to the hospital and sat by my bedside, waiting for me to wake, enduring my fearful tears when I did, watching the nurses give me shots and adjust my bandages, listening to my screams when the doctors changed the dressings. Did she retreat? Crawl into a cavernous place of grief—perhaps denial—to deal with the shock, the pain?

Neighborhood girls took turns babysitting my siblings while she was at the hospital. At the end of the day, she’d go home to her three other children. Friends and family members helped out. Still, how could it have been for her to watch me cry, seeing me bloodied and bandaged, knowing I was terrified, knowing I suffered, knowing there was nothing she could do but try to soothe me? Then going home to three young children, ages ten, three, and nine months. They also needed her attention.

She must have been overwhelmed, emotionally and physically. And still she came and sat. Sat with her knitting, absently crossing needle over needle, moving the yarn from left to right, right to left. I see her deft hands, her pointer fingers crisscrossing each other with each stitch, her mouth a set line, her brow furrowed. The ball of yarn unfurling.

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Ten days after surgery, Mom and I go downtown to Dr. Kislov’s office to have my stitches out. The office is in a two-story modern-looking building, and there is a soda fountain on the first floor. Mom promises to buy me a malted milkshake after

the stitches are out. Dr. Kislov's office is paneled in dark wood, with boxy green-fabric couches.

"Hello, Marcia," Dr. Kislov says. "How are you today, eh?"

He brings his face close to mine, staring at the wounds, gently probing with his fingers, assessing the dozens of stitches he has sewed into it. I can smell his aftershave and the antiseptic on his fingers.

"Okay, up on the table."

I lie on the examining table and he leans over and peers closely at my face, his thick dark brows furrowed. A nurse holds my arms across my chest then, and he begins to tug at each suture with a long tweezer, stretching the thread so he can snip it with a scissors. He gently tugs the suture from my tender skin. I start to cry, and Dr. Kislov says, "If you cry, I will send your mother out of the room, ja?" *NO!* I think. *No.* So I suck in my breath and blink back my tears.

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Surgical transplantation of skin—skin grafting—has been around for centuries. Roman and Egyptian physicians repaired damaged ears with plastic surgery as early as the first century BCE. But an Indian surgeon named Sushruta is widely considered to be the first to successfully perform skin grafting. He started fashioning new noses from strips of flesh from the forehead. It was the first flap, which is a graft of skin that remains connected and pivoted from the donor site. Sushruta also was the first to perform rhinoplasty.

It wasn't until the 1820s, though, that doctors executed a successful modern skin graft. There are two kinds of skin grafts: flaps, which remain attached and are rotated from an adjacent area, and wholly separate grafts taken from another part of the body. With a flap, a piece of skin (called a pedicle) is left attached so blood can feed the donated skin until it grafts onto the new site. Grafts taken from another part of the body are placed onto a donor site and the surgeon connects tiny blood vessels, allowing the graft to be fed from the underlying dermis. A skin graft can be varying thicknesses, depending on the injury. A tool much like a large vegetable peeler, called a dermatome, is used to harvest the skin from one part of the body, for example the thigh, for placement elsewhere.

Dr. Kislov initially used a flap from my neck to replace my damaged cheek, then covered the hole left in my neck with a full-thickness graft (the top two layers of skin) from my left thigh. He took a split-thickness graft (the top layer and part of the second) from my right thigh to cover the left thigh donor site. Most of the grafts on my chest and stomach were split-thickness, and the scars are not as prominent as the thicker grafts.

I have three scars from grafts on my chest, three on my stomach and hips, and two on my thighs. And, of course, the scars on my face and eyelid.

Dr. Richard Kislov was born in Germany in 1921 and studied medicine at the Faculty of Medicine of the Eberhard Karls Universität in Tübingen. A year after graduation, in 1951, he immigrated to the United States where he completed his general and surgical residencies. In 1958, he settled in Muskegon and started a private practice. He quickly became known for his precise work, his fine suturing, his ability to sculpt faces—particularly cleft palates—and to reconnect severed fingers and limbs.

He was gifted in the art of sculpting skin, but also, later, in sculpting clay into life-size bronze figures. He loved to design gardens, and he studied architecture. Though he dismissed it once when an interviewer asked about the connections between his chosen fields—surgeon, builder, designer, sculptor—it would be hard to argue that he was not an artist. The only difference was the medium in which he chose to work.

March 1, 1963 - Surgeon's notes:

Excision of hypertrophic scar surrounding previously rotated flap of left cheek, extending from left temporal area, running forward, below left lower eyelid toward the nose, then descending down laterally to the left corner of the mouth and then into neck. There, in neck scar, surrounding also previously applied skin graft covering donor site of flap. Excision of hypertrophic scar of left side of upper lip. Undermining of the flap. Plastic closure of the wound from left temple to the left corner of the mouth, leaving the wounds of upper lip and neck open for future full-thickness skin graft.

Dr. Kislov takes out his ballpoint pen and draws lines all around my left cheek, neck, and mouth, noting where he will add a graft here, where he might excise tissue there. When he is done, he sits back and stares at my face with his wide, gap-toothed smile.

“There! Now do not wash your face, Marcia. Eh?”

He looks at my mom and she nods.

“Okay! Give me a hug.” He pulls me into a great bear hug, then holds me away from him for a minute, looking at my face. I see his impish gap-toothed grin, his thick glasses, his broad cheeks. I see my tiny face reflected in his glasses. I smile.

“Okay,” he repeats. “See you tomorrow.”

Then he stands and leaves the room.

My therapist, Michael, sits across from me, asks about my memories of waking up and having my hands tied to the hospital bed rails. My stomach clenches as I remember being unable to scratch my maddeningly itchy ears. Not being able to see. Not knowing where I was or who was nearby. Fear rises up and envelops me. There is a disembodied voice. My mother’s? A nurse’s? Someone who wanted to stick me and draw blood? They were all the same: distant, dreamlike, unreal. Terrifying.

“It’s almost like I was abused or something,” I say.

“Let’s be clear, Marcia,” Michael says forcefully, “you were abused. There is no difference between what was done to you and the trauma experienced by an abused child.”

“But it was done for my own good.”

“Doesn’t matter. It was still abuse.”

In later years, Dr. Kislov turned his talent more and more to sculpture, gaining recognition regionally and nationally. After we moved to California when I was eighteen, my aunt sent me a newspaper clipping announcing a gallery showing of his works.

In it, Dr. Kislov says he tried to keep his work as a sculptor separate from his work as a surgeon, insisting the two had little to do with one another. Yet his large

bronzes are figures fashioned after real people, friends and acquaintances he knew in Muskegon. His pieces are exceptionally expressive, the faces exquisitely formed, the hands precise and lifelike.

The term “plastic” in plastic surgery comes from the Greek *plastike*, to sculpt or model. How much difference, really, can there be between crafting a face from flesh or clay?

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It is morning. Mom and I are sitting at the dining room table, and bright sun flows through the open window behind her. The smell of jasmine sweetens the air. She has eaten her oatmeal, which I made for her. She has her numerous pills in her little green dish next to her glass of water, and she is taking them one by one. Her playing cards sit off to the side, ready for her morning hand of solitaire.

“What do you remember about that day,” I ask her, “that day I was hit by the car?”

It has been forty-three years since that morning. Now, she is seventy-nine and struggles with arthritis and other pains. She has pain in her upper right groin that no one can quite figure out. The doctor almost dismisses it, but she complains about it constantly. Her hands hurt, her feet hurt, her side hurts. I do not know what to do. Just like when I was little, I am once again trying to please her, to make her happy. We sit at the table in silence. She frowns.

I plead again, “Mom, can you tell me what you remember about that morning?”

I am trying to write about the accident and those early years of surgeries and hurt. But I have no recollection of that morning. My older sister remembers some of it, and we have talked at length. But Mom, she’s reluctant to talk.

She looks down at her cards.

“I was on the phone with Mimi,” she says, “sitting in the front hall. I heard yelling outside, and Cherie ran in screaming.”

She hesitates.

“I went in the ambulance with you to the hospital. I don’t remember much else. I think I was in shock.”

She won’t help. I am left frustrated and dissatisfied. Again.

Over time, she shut down. Sat and patted my hand as they pulled stitches from my face, or placed another needle into my arm, or held me down for another change

of dressings. But she was gone. Pushed her feelings to a deep place so she could manage daily life.

October 5, 1973 - Surgeon's notes:

Diagnosis: Somewhat irregular scar in left nasolabial fold extending into left side of chin with excessive fullness of cheek. Surgery: excision of 3" scar in left nasolabial fold, excision of excess of full-thickness skin graft of left side of upper lip, undermining of skin flap of reconstructed left cheek and excision of excess of fat and scar in this area. Closure of wound with subcuticular interrupted sutures of 5-0 clear nylon and continuous superficial sutures of 6-0 nylon. Several space sutures were placed, leaving long ends around the wound and bolus of cotton saturated in saline was placed over the wound and immobilized by tying long ends of sutures over it. This was done to decrease dead space underneath the operative area.

I am seventeen. Until this surgery my left cheek bulged with extra fat, tugging on the skin so the lower lid gaped open and the eye was slightly exposed. It's apparent in all the photos taken of me those years, especially the school photos, for which I refused to smile. Why would I? My parents sent all of us kids to St. Joe's; a Catholic education was important to them. And so I spent six years at St. Joe's, and arrived there for first grade just three months after the accident.

I was teased, chided and made fun of, punished when I tried to strike out at those who persecuted me, wanted to scream obscenities and hit them with my fists. But I couldn't. Instead, I acted out, and Sister would sentence me to what seemed like hours in a darkened cloakroom, breathing in the smell of wet woolen mittens and cloaks and galoshes. A darkroom of refuge and shame.

But then, when I was in high school, Dr. Kislov carved out the excess tissue and fat from my left cheek, and it began to look more like my right. The sag in my eyelid wasn't as pronounced, and while I wasn't all that excited about having another surgery (at that point it was my eighteenth), I was happy with the result.

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After my grandpa died, at the beginning of my senior year in high school, my dad sold his share of the family business to my two uncles, and we planned a move to California. Shortly before Christmas, Mom and I went to see Dr. Kislov for the last time.

As usual, I sat on the examination table while Dr. Kislov peered at my face. The last surgery I had undergone was a year before, and, as he often did, he pushed his horn-rimmed glasses up on his forehead and brought his face close to mine. He leaned back and lightly smacked my left knee with his hand.

“There, Marcia! Is good, ja? When you are thirty-five I will give you a facelift and you will be beautiful. Now give me a hug, eh?”

It was the last time I ever saw him. But many years later, in the 1990s when I was in my thirties, I took one of those weekend self-improvement seminars and they encouraged us to reach out to someone from the past with whom we felt there was unfinished business. I called Dr. Kislov.

Honestly, I hadn’t thought about him in years. But the seminar had brought up some very painful memories, particularly of my mother leaving me at night when I was in my hospital crib. I felt an urgent need to talk with him. Did he remember me? What had he thought that morning when they brought me into the hospital? Did he have a grand plan, or did he make it up as the years—and surgeries—went by?

It was a Saturday, and when I called his office I got his exchange. I don’t remember what I said, but somehow I convinced them I had to talk with him, and they gave me his home number.

When he answered, I barely got out, “Dr. Kislov, it’s Marcia . . .” before I broke down in tears. I think I sobbed through the whole conversation, which perhaps lasted five or ten minutes. He seemed surprised and happy to hear from me, and asked me about my life. I remember I told him how much he had meant to me when I was little, and I think I thanked him. But mostly I cried, and he just listened and said: “Ja, ja. It’s good to hear from you, Marcia.”

Remembering this exchange makes me teary. He represented hope and pain, sadness and conflicting, inexplicable feelings of love. He was my savior and my torturer, my surgeon and father figure.

When we left Michigan, I never considered what it might mean to never see him again. That not seeing him would leave such a huge emotional hole in my being. Part of me never wanted to see him again. But another part, a tender place that resided in my five-year-old self, wanted him to hold my face in his big hands again, to beam at me with his gap-toothed grin, to pat my knee and laugh in the big way he did. I realize he represented, in a strange way, a sense of comfort and safety, a time in my life when things were predictable—terrifying, yes—but predictable.

October 29, 2007

Dear Dr. Kislov,

I hope this finds you well! I'm sure you remember me: You were my surgeon from the time I was hit by a car at age five, in 1961, until we moved to California in 1974. I am writing a memoir, and would love to have a chance to talk with you.

If I come to Michigan sometime in the next few months, would you be willing to meet with me? Do you still have any records from all those years ago? My dad kept invoices from most of my surgeries. If I brought them, would you be able to tell me in more detail exactly what was done? I'd also love to talk with you about anything you remember about the day I was injured. My family has told me stories about Bill Bonds, our family doctor, asking you to see me after I was brought in, but I don't know if it's true. I also was told you happened to be at the hospital when I arrived, but I don't know if that's true. I know you were living in Grand Rapids at the time.

I don't know for certain right now when I will be coming, but I'm hoping sometime in February, if not before.

I look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes,

Marcia Meier

I never heard from him. I wanted to ask him so many questions. What did he think when he first saw me in the emergency room? How did he plan the surgeries over all those years? Did he have a grand scheme in mind all along, or did he make it up as time went by, adjusting for this result or that?

Did he care for me at all?

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Dr. Kislov died in November 2012 at the age of ninety-one. My cousin sent me the obituary from *The Muskegon Chronicle*, which said he was known as “a skilled surgeon, a sculptor, a lay architect, a landscaper and pond designer, and as a great lover of nature.”

I was struck by the comments left on the funeral home’s website; there were others—other children—who knew him in the same way I had. And that knowledge was both comforting and discomfoting. I had believed I was the only one.

A couple from Twin Lake, Michigan, wrote: “Our son was home from Chicago the other day, and I looked at him and thought of you, Dr. Kislov! Thirty-six years ago we met at Hackley Hospital. You were called in to see our son, who was born with a cleft lip and palate. You took one look at him and said, ‘I will make him beautiful!’ and you did!”

Many others wrote similar tributes.

And he told several of them, as he did me, that he would make us beautiful. Such an interesting thing to say to a child. I remember thinking at the time that being beautiful wasn’t something I ever thought about. I just wanted to look normal. To him, though, it was the greatest gift he could offer.

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Not long ago, I went to see an ophthalmologist. After several minutes of peering into my eyes, he asked about the scars around my eye. I explained what had happened.

“Who was the surgeon?” he asked. I told him, adding that Dr. Kislov had died recently.

The ophthalmologist pushed his chair back and gazed intently at the left side of my face. After a few moments I started to feel a little self-conscious, so I said, “He did a pretty good job, didn’t he?”

Almost with a sense of wonder, the eye doctor replied: “Yes. Better than good.”

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When I look in the mirror, the face I see is not mine. It's something I made up, something I created to hold my childhood fears, a vessel for sadness and hurt, a place for momentary and long-lasting loss. Skin and bones and gristle and scar tissue that rises and flows, pink ridges of grief laid bare. Raw. Then I look again. And it is simply a mouth, a nose, deep brown eyes, cheeks, chin. One of Dr. Kislov's living sculptures, crafted with scalpel and sutures and surgical steel.

This piece is adapted from Marcia Meier's memoir *Face* (Saddle Road Press, 2021). "Skin Craft" was shortlisted for the 2021 Fish Publishing Short Memoir Prize.