

My Battlefield Skin

I press the folded-over and scrunched tube into a corner of my dresser in order to finesse a small dollop of clindamycin phosphate/tretinoin onto my finger. I have been slowly running out of my colorful tubes and sprays for the past year and the link to my online pharmacy has expired. They never really work anyway and it's difficult to schedule an appointment with my San Antonio dermatologist. When I started seeing her at 19, it was the first time I had gone to a doctor's appointment by myself. I had gotten my driver's license just a month prior and the day before the appointment I carefully drove the route with my mother in the passenger's seat. Go past the H-E-B and the kindergarten. Take a left at the Home Depot. Find an easy parking place, preferably one away from other cars I could hit. Walk in and tell the receptionist my name and fill out the form. Talk to the nurse. Talk to the doctor. Don't get prescribed Accutane.

The whole endeavor felt like I was clumsily practicing the choreography of adulthood. A dance that felt even harder with my face still marked with pubescence in the form of acne, which was the catalyst for the appointment. Instead of my face clearing as I got older, my acne was getting worse.

I sat on the paper-covered exam table and played Sudoku on my phone waiting for the doctor. Eventually, there was the customary warning knock at the door. A woman in blue scrubs and a white coat entered. She perched on the rolling stool in front of the computer and read over the nurse's dutifully written notes before swiveling to face me. We chatted noncommittally as she studied my face and asked me to pull up the back of my shirt to expose the acne that speckled my shoulders. It all took far less time than I was expecting. Within two minutes she was sitting on the stool across from me again, hands resting calmly in the pockets of her jacket.

“You have cystic acne. See that scar there—” she pointed to a divot on my forehead, in the groove of my expression lines. “You’re going to get more of them.”

Although I knew my skin was worse than my friends, it still surprised me to be labeled as *cystic*.

“I see you’re on birth control. Is that helping?”

“No.” I was almost grateful it hadn’t helped. I disliked being on the pill. The thought of the hormones floating through my bloodstream and fundamentally interrupting the delicate functioning of my organs was unappealing. I was only on it because of the influence of an objectively shitty boyfriend. It was a poor substitute for bodily autonomy, and I stopped taking it soon after I dumped him.

“My suggestion is that we start with antibiotics and if those don’t work we can do a round of Accutane.”

I shrugged. “Okay. My mom told me to avoid any pills. And I don’t want to take Accutane.”

“Sure, we can revisit it later.” Her tone hinted that she had seen plenty of teenage girls change their minds. She prescribed me a topical antibiotic, along with two different prescription creams.

I never changed my mind though. Far deeper emotions than vanity swirled around Accutane for me.

All women of childbearing potential who are on Accutane are also using a primary and secondary method of birth control. The pill, intrauterine devices, and the hormonal shot all count as primary forms. Abstinence or condoms are secondary forms. My roommate was finishing up her eighth month on low-dosage Accutane when I met her and her glorious skin our freshman

year. We spent nearly all of our time together in 168 square feet. I was surprised when she came home with a pregnancy test because I knew as well as anyone that she wasn't having sex. The iPLEDGE program doesn't make fine distinctions like that. If you can get pregnant, you need that monthly negative test to fill your prescription. "Why?" I asked my roommate. She responded casually, "Accutane makes a baby's head fill up like a water balloon."

Accutane, or more specifically the vitamin-A derivative isotretinoin, is a teratogenic agent. Even a short exposure to a low dosage causes severe birth defects. Accutane started being produced in 1982 by pharmaceutical company Hoffman-LaRoche after it had been researched as an (unsuccessful) treatment for skin cancer, and after it had been semi-successful treating in severe skin conditions like ichthyosis, and highly successful in treating cystic acne. Birth defects had been observed in animal models, so the FDA labeled the drug as category X, which means that for pregnant women, the risks of the drug clearly outweigh the benefits. However, some women still become unexpectedly pregnant while on Accutane and unintentionally expose the fetus to the drug. In the 1980s, the FDA recognized 64 cases of babies born with Accutane-induced birth defects. (This number does not include induced or spontaneous abortions of exposed fetuses.) The first of these babies was born the same year Accutane hit the market. The mother had taken the medication for 8 days before she found out she was pregnant. Images of the baby are available in a journal article describing the teratogenic effects of retinoids (the class of chemical that includes isotretinoin and is more commonly known for reducing wrinkles). Her ears were small and misplaced on a head made abnormally large from fluid buildup in the brain. The baby's heart did not beat correctly, she had seizures, and she underwent significant medical intervention in her 28 days of life. Accutane is now highly regulated by the FDA through programs like iPLEDGE to prevent future exposures to the damaging agent. While birth

defects are a terrifying risk of the drug, I was afraid to take Accutane for myself, not because of some hypothetical pregnancy.

I remember watching him skateboard on the street in front of our adjacent houses. If he was sixteen, I must have been six. I watched him from our front porch, looking up from mixing together every lotion and soap in our cabinets into a “potion.” He would practice ollies and kickflips over and over, the board clattering on asphalt and a lank of hair perpetually hanging in his face. That must have been before he started Accutane. All my other memories of him are from the nighttime. My bedroom window was closest to his, separated only by the width of our driveways. I would wake up to his screaming fits. My mom, being a light sleeper, would also wake up and come into my room to shush me back to sleep because it was a school night. He would get into such horrible fights with his mother that my parents would call the cops. I overheard a conversation between my parents about him having a psychotic break. He believed he was a reincarnated Civil War soldier. A Confederate. In any case, he was living through some kind of war within his mind.

I wonder what my dermatologist would have said had I told her that I was afraid of Accutane because I was afraid of losing my mind. The research surrounding the psychological effects of isotretinoin is mixed. Some studies suggest that people with pre-existing psychiatric conditions may experience an exasperation of symptoms when taking isotretinoin. The warning label for isotretinoin has included possible depressive effects since 1998 and most doctors include a mental health screen before prescribing. Some papers report that people taking Accutane are more likely to become depressed while others claim the exact opposite, that treating acne actually alleviates depressive symptoms. There are plenty of cases of young people

like my neighbor undergoing dramatic personality changes or committing suicide within months of going on Accutane.

I asked my roommate what it was like having to initial a long list of possible side effects before being prescribed Accutane. If she was as afraid of her mental health slipping out of her grasp as I was. She looked me in the eye, “Leigha, my acne was already making me depressed. I had tried literally every other acne treatment in existence. I just needed something to work.”

And Accutane works. 85% of patients achieve clear skin in the first round. It’s unpleasant to be on it—90% of patients experience painfully dry skin and lips—but wildly popular. Over two million people have taken it.

So why is isotretinoin so popular? Severe acne can be painful, yes, but it’s not life-threatening. A critical part of the story is how acne is more than skin deep. Skin is a thin layer of cells that’s meant to protect us from the outside world, but socially it often does the opposite. Cruel comments, and even well-intentioned ones, cut through this barrier and open our bodies to the judgments of others. Every time I visit home I hug my mom and as I pull away she comments about my skin. She’ll wince “Babygirl, your skin is upset at you. Have you been washing your face every day? You should go wash it right now.” I’ll roll my eyes and sometimes argue back. How it doesn’t help, it’s just my skin, or I don’t like how it gets my sideburns wet. I know she brings it up because she loves me and is trying to protect me from the resentment people have towards acne. I hate how it feels like she is wielding that resentment toward me.

There’s this story from high school that my mom loves to tell me. There was a badly bullied boy in her small, rural town that everyone called Pizza Face. She describes him as having the stereotypical mountains of angry red skin. That, like pizza, you just wanted to place a napkin

on it and dab away the extra oil. She said one day the science teacher, in front of the whole class, identified Pizza Face's problem as hygienic laziness. He prescribed a soap-and-water scrub three times a day. Pizza Face, called out and chagrined, complied. Within a month, so the myth goes, his acne miraculously cleared.

The story emphasizes the view that acne is not only something to be disdained but that it's also a reflection of failure. My mother's memory of this classmate has been consumed by his inflamed skin. The actions of the teacher are viewed as blunt yet merciful. And, like all good parables, once the boy had overcome his moral shortcoming of dirtiness he was rewarded.

Combatting acne is a practice of obsession. We battle it through makeup and photo touch-ups, 7-step skincare routines and special diets, and medications with long warning labels. It is a source of deep self-consciousness for many people, especially when it's severe or lingers for longer than is socially acceptable. I don't like my acne. Some days I am filled with the urge to scrape off the ugly layer of my skin and grow back a better one. On other days it doesn't bother me at all. Most of the time I find a cruel comfort in knowing that my mother is more bothered by my acne than I am.

My roommate and I are standing in front of the bathroom mirror getting ready to go out. She is finishing up applying her eyeliner. The rest of her skin is bare, very different from the foundation she used to slather on in high school to hide her acne. I never wear makeup (another opinion about skin that was instilled by my mother) but still feel a tinge of jealousy at her smooth complexion even though I refuse to cover my smattering of pimples. Accutane has been a common topic for us as I've been writing this essay.

I tell her how “I think I’m the type of person who would go crazy on it.” We make eye contact in the mirror.

“I don’t believe that,” she says. “But I also know you, and you’re not going to take it.”