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## More than Skin Deep

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I developed eczema in my twenties in Pakistan. The dermatologist said it was stress or maybe the handle bars in the university bus as a student. This is how I was introduced to my life companion disease, something of an enigma. Something that had a name but no definite reason. I changed doctors and with it changed the shape of my medicines. White circular tablets or rectangular cream tubes, sitting on my bedside, each one holding the potential for a miraculous cure. But with repeated disclaimers from doctors, hope boiled down to controlling the spread rather than the permanent disappearance of eczema.

What was alarming in the beginning—the roughness and itchiness of the skin on the index finger—became the new normal as years passed by. There were months of relief, when I developed a new soft skin needing nothing more than an occasional moisturizer. But there were more months when the seasonal dry spells within and outside of me took a toll on my hands. One doctor said my body thought of my skin as a foreign enemy and

my autoimmune system was attacking it. My inner core would have bursts of energy when it vehemently was on the offensive and the eczema spread, like a creeper on a wall, from one finger to many, and with it the public shame.

Rashes, bumps, cuts, darkening and paling of skin, dry scales, swelling—all these words I needed to hide from the people on the bus, at school, at parties, and on subways. I could tell when people tried “not” to look. Not looking was worse than the stare: The agitation in the eyes shifting towards and away from my hands. The maintaining of the facade of “not my business,” yet the face contorting to surprise, sympathy, curiosity, mild disgust, and confusion. All that for something that did not define me.

With all the reactions that my hands provoked, I learned the subtle art of concealment. My hands would automatically slide beneath the purse I was holding. My better hand would overlap my “other” one. I would look down at my hands through outsider-angled eyes—which parts can they see? Are they looking? A disease magnified by stress can become the cause of stress. I knew that strangers’ assumptions, made in seconds, should not matter. But assessments of the whole are made on parts. And where the eye focuses can make the part seem like the whole. And more than that, I was an equally guilty accomplice in judging my hands. I silently grudged my hands in water, cooking, picking, holding. My hands, my action figures always calling attention to themselves. But there was an added awareness of the changing states of my

hands in different seasons and mediums maybe not consciously felt by others. I was careful to hold the dishwashing sponge with minimal contact to that part, and when winter winds reached my heart, the hand lotion stayed in my purse.

I learned to let go of things that were once a life ritual. I miss henna designs the most, a must when Eid came. Intricate patterns on both sides on both hands coupled with colourful glass bangles, making soft musical notes when they moved. The application of brown tattoos would sting my affected skin. But for many years I tried stubbornly to create designs and worked around the patches, like a maze leading the eye away from a darkened alley until there was not enough landscape to work on.

Over time, unused nail polishes dried, and rings sat on the silver platter on the dressing table, gathering dust. Less attention to the hands was better. You couldn't make something that was crumbling pretty with accessories. To be a woman with eczema defies the stereotypical concept of a woman's body as soft and smooth. Oh, how I wished at times that gloves would come in vogue, so that I could hide the band aids on the cuts patched on the side of my hand. So that a handshake would not be hasty and awkward, all the warmth I wished to convey replaced by the anxiety of offering a rough textured hand. The wondering if the other person thought I was a semi-civilized ignorant woman from the East who did not know the purpose of a hand moisturizer. Or worse, their having the fear that it was conta-

gious. I swallowed explanation in my mouth, knowing that talking about it would be more awkward than letting the moment pass. Bits of ourselves that we allow people to misunderstand because talking about it would take so much emotional energy. The barriers we do not remove because social decorum is important, and awkward open conversations that connect us to the mutual current of humanity less so.

The acceptance of disease is a difficult inward admission that takes years to seep in, because the person must learn to accept the changed self. Yet denial has a limit to its elasticity and caves in eventually to skin marks that intensify over time.

In a visit to the doctor, I wished there was more to it than, *Let's see your hands and feet. Do you have it anywhere else?*—accompanied with instructions to moisturize more and the final rip of the prescription page of the doctors' pad. I wished she saw more than my skin, like everyone else at the first glance. There was a neutrality in her tone which was a relief, but she did not see how the skin covered not just my body but also my identity.

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