



Who has had the unpleasant experience of waking up next to a lover while being completely ashamed of their looks?

Who knows the courage it takes to teach teenagers while having more pimples than any one of them — knowing that these same students won't miss a single opportunity to make you aware of it?

Who understands how difficult it is to go shopping when the reflection in each and every mirror is unbearable?

Who understands how hard it is to be in a good mood when the simple act of getting out of the house is a major ordeal?

Who knows how many social activities one suffering from severe acne can avoid because they feel awful about their looks?

I have the answer to all these questions....

I have lived it for 20 years.

A long time ago, a young 13 year old girl showed up at a dermatologist's office in the city of Joliet. I was this young girl. I recall that moment as if it were yesterday. I had a line of four small blackheads on my nose. My mother, a charming woman who had had many blackheads in the past, was well aware of the importance of having a beautiful skin. Moreover, she feared that my genetic background could be problematic for me. As my father had

also lived a long time with the discomfort of having boils, she believed that every effort had to be made when the first symptoms arose. My parents both believed that an ounce of prevention was worth more than a pound of cure. After all; I had been a beautiful young girl and so should become a beautiful teenager!

The situation rapidly degenerated.

As of the following year, and without anyone knowing the precise reasons why, my skin condition worsened. It had a tendency to become greasy and above all it had a high predisposition for cysts... **huge and numerous cysts.** Greatly preoccupied by my appearance, I rapidly learned the virtues of make-up. Skillfully, I would apply a heavy coat of foundation on my skin. I would make excessive use of make-up on my eyes and lips to both accentuate them and detract from my other features. Troubled by my reflection in the mirror, I did my best to hide the redness of my skin. With the help of cosmeticians, I selected well known, expensive brands to ensure the purchase of quality products which were adapted to my skin type.

Those who have had cysts are well aware of their negative aspects:

1. Cysts are located beneath the skin. They seldom erupt so...they stay for a very long time – some of which I had for over two years.
2. Cysts are much larger than pimples. Using a syringe, the dermatologist had to extract several cubic centimeters of fluids from some of my cysts. Also, they are much redder and are therefore very difficult to hide under make-up.

3. Cysts are very easy to see.
4. Their redness makes using make-up as a means to hide them much harder. As such they are visible at all times. Thus they have a greater impact. They modify your self-perception and undermine your self-confidence. They play a key role in the social activities you choose to attend, in your selection of friends, in creating romantic relationships, affect you in your working environment and I could go on and on....
5. Above all, cysts are very **very painful**.

At that time, I also consulted an esthetician. At first, she had a positive attitude. However, the frequent facials were leaving my skin swollen, red and irritated for over a week. Furthermore, numerous and severe acne attacks would follow these treatments. I recall her making extractions, applying masks, and proceeding to high frequency treatments.

By the time I put an end to the treatments with the esthetician, she had tried everything in her power to help me. There were no discernible results despite all her efforts. For the first time in my life, I thought that I would never be cured of acne and feared that I would have to live the rest of my life with the torments of this condition.

I was lucky in my misfortune. Both my parents were supportive of me, and they never stopped thinking I was a good, intelligent and beautiful person. They never abandoned me. I remember that they did not let me flounder through creams, soaps and lotions for

very long. Furthermore, they never attempted to minimize my sorrow or try to ignore the problems I was experiencing because of my looks. They always had a positive attitude and would insist in finding a solution. I had tried several soaps, creams and many different treatments offered either by estheticians, dermatologists, pediatricians, pharmacists, acupuncturists, and many others – you’d probably laugh if I listed all of them -- all of which resulted in total failure. It was then that my parents brought me to a private clinic to meet with Dr X.

He was then, and probably still is, the best dermatologist in North America. My parents never haggled over the expenses they incurred. Over the years, they have spent thousands of dollars to provide me access to all the treatments and professional services available, regardless of the cost.

I remember my first meeting with Dr X: an impeccable man, with silky-smooth skin. A respectable man, ageless, seemingly untouched by the effects of time. A pleasant man, strong, confident with a great sense of humor. He had taken the time to talk about politics and to jest before speaking to me about my acne problems. A man that understood the pain of those living with the problems generated by acne. He was the first person to truly understand the physical pain I was enduring. At once he told he would cure me. I had no other choice but to believe him. I did believe him – him more than any of the predecessors. He assured me that he would never let me down...and he never has.

On my first visit, he made a note in my medical file that I was to be a priority patient, and that if I should call for an appointment, it should be granted to me that very day, each and every time I should request it. As it turns out, this was always respected. I even had access to the doctor at night and on weekends, and have even consulted him 10:30pm once. I remember him joking about the fact that the only patient that had priority over me was a celebrity that he was also treating. She would call him for an appointment before filming. In actuality I often wondered if I didn't come first on his list – such was the confidence he inspired through his deep compassion and commitment to me.

For the longest time he was my greatest hope for a life – a spark of hope in my darkest nights.

But acne is a monster

Everyone knows what a person suffering from acne looks like. What no one can imagine is the emotional strength required just to make it through daily life. Firstly, acne sufferers must put-up with the glances cast their way. There are sometimes those who stare unashamedly. Or others whose looks are furtive and evasive, for they seem to be as uncomfortable in the presence of such acne as is the sufferer. The worst of all, are the looks by those whose eyes are filled with pity.

I remember when I was 18 years old, I had a huge cyst which remained for more than two years. It covered most of my left cheek and it was dark blue. It was impossible to conceal. The size of the cyst caused my lower eyelid to be compressed. This resulted in numerous eye infections.

At that time I worked as a salesperson in a boutique. Once, during the Christmas season, a frequent customer stopped by the store to come and say “Hi” to me. She hugged me and discretely handed me a piece of paper. On the note was the telephone number of a shelter for battered women. I remember crying as I returned home that night.

As a teenager, having a deformed face due to severe acne has many negative repercussions on your life. It means the loss of self-esteem; you can develop such disgust about your looks that you can't look people in the eye, for fear of finding either disgust or pity there.

Suffering from severe acne means living with the fear of never living a romance, of never feeling proud about your looks. It affects self-confidence, makes you live in fear of rejection, causes you to be timid and introverted as you try to find refuge within yourself.

I remember a morning when my mother walked into the bathroom while I was staring at myself in the mirror, crying. I was trying to apply make-up, with little success, to hide my acne, right before going to school. My mother hugged me and softly said: “You know Caroline, you could take a break today and stay at home to rest.” I found this offer quite enticing. I was sorely tempted by this suggestion and seriously considered this option. In the end I realized that if I allowed myself to stay at home because of my looks, I would never again find the courage to leave the house to face the world.

I got out of bed and I went to school

Acne made me aggressive because I felt a terrible injustice had been perpetrated on me. Why me? But acne also made me terribly sad and depressed. I feared that I would never like myself, afraid that my life would become a perpetual fight against my own image. I was afraid that I would wake-up and cry in front of the mirror every morning for the rest of my life. Acne brought on insecurity, and made me doubt my talents and my abilities. Everything was now connected with my looks. It became a permanent cause of concern – an obsession borne out of the pain caused by this specific type of acne. Furthermore, it is very difficult to sleep with a huge cyst on your cheek, since it hurts every time you roll over in your slumber thereby resulting in many sleepless nights.

Kissing both cheeks is the traditional way to greet people in my culture. At Christmas time, this tradition becomes an unending ritual repeated at frequent intervals. These moments became nightmarish ordeals because of the pain they caused. How does one reject loving nieces and nephews that want nothing more than to kiss you, completely unaware of the pain they are inadvertently causing?

Should I even mention the interminable treatments where the doctor would extract pus from the cysts with the use of a long needle?

Acne hurts from the outside in! However, acne also helped me to grow. I know that I am a courageous person, because of the many mornings where I had to overcome my fears and force myself to face the world. I had to devise various strategies to help me get

through life. For example, I would confront the problem head-on, by starting any new conversation by saying: “*Yes I do have a cystic acne condition. Do you have any questions?*” I also lied. I remember saying once that I had a reaction to cosmetics. People seemed to be more comfortable with the idea of allergic reactions than a medical condition such as acne. At a certain point I was the only person in my age group to still suffer from acne. I remember thinking that I was very ugly. There comes a time when always talking about your acne becomes tiring.

As the awful saying goes, “*Ugly girls must have great personalities.*” Well, I was tremendously polite. I learnt to be funny, to express myself with witty eloquence and to show empathy and sensitivity to others. Debating my views with energy, I was known as a go-getter, a good soul, a person that others wished to be with. I had developed these facets of my personality to help create relationships with friends and lovers. Yes, I always had a lover. Even in my darkest moments, I was fortunate to always have a boyfriend next to me to tell me that I was still beautiful. My friends and my family reminded me of this as well. Yet, for a long time I believed they said this out of a sense of compassion and sometimes even as mockery.

Did I ever tell you, Marlène¹, that I don’t have any memory of ever finding myself even slightly pretty? I recall a boyfriend who had a beard, who I could not kiss with ardor fearing his beard which would irritate my skin making it painfully red for hours.

There was never a time when I woke-up next to a lover or family and friends,

¹ Marlène is my esthetician.

without the need to dash-off to the bathroom to shower and apply make-up – at times for hours, until I felt comfortable enough to be in their presence.

Medication can also be monstrous.

In order to control my acne, I had to sacrifice my health for many years. First, there were the side effects: on my stomach, my digestive system, and my kidneys. Then, there were the side effects specific to Accutane®, which included hair loss, loss of appetite, flaking of the skin, loss of skin sensitivity and then hypersensitivity. There were also the psychological side effects these medicines produced, including depressive states or outright-depression. As if suffering from acne wasn't depressing enough!

That's not the worst of it! The worst is the loss of hope. Every time I tried a new type of treatment, I hoped for a cure. Or at the very least, I hoped for my condition to improve. But it never did. NEVER. Nothing is worse than to hope over and over again...in vain, or to give free rein to emotive fragility, to the belief that it could happen...only to be disappointed, dispirited and discouraged once again.

The worst experience I had taking these medicines was when I got pregnant. At the time that I was told the good news, I was using strong medication. As such, I had to go through a battery of tests to confirm that my unborn baby was healthy and not harmed by these medications. I was so worried. I felt responsible for any complications my baby might have to endure because of me. Yet, I could not imagine going through nine months of pregnancy

without any medication to control my acne. I then felt such guilt for thinking about my appearance at a time of such joy. I have no pictures of myself during my pregnancy. You can imagine why. Once again my acne overshadowed my life and darkened the most meaningful moments – even the joy of being pregnant with my first-born.

Let's return to Dr X. Dr. X had me go through the cream and ointment sagas again. He wanted to evaluate their effect on my acne problem. He remained very optimistic and took my situation very seriously.

Because of the failure of these soft techniques, he quickly switched to the next step. From the age of 15, I started taking different medications daily. From anovulants (which at times can settle some hormonal problems), to minocyclin, penicillin, cortisone, and other heavy prescription drugs. Back then, Dr X was still hesitant in prescribing the use of Accutane® to me. He thought of me as too young to start such a treatment due to the multiple side effects it produces. Therefore he was trying to "control" each and every acne attack. My appointments were scheduled every three weeks, and he was hopeful that they would diminish and stop completely. They never did.

One of Dr X' fears was that my skin would be covered in scars. My cysts were deep, huge, and never ending. It was categorically forbidden for me to touch them. Cortisone injections were administered in each cyst to relieve the pain that each was causing me. I once counted 27 injections to my face in just one session. Needless to say, these sessions were very painful. Yet the next morning, the inflammation had decreased. The redness, size and

swelling had diminished and applying make-up became easier. At times, some cysts disappeared. But, it was never permanent. We controlled the attacks partially, but I was not cured. I remember feeling pain often. One of the nurses had a soft touch and could inject me less painfully than the others. Her name was Louise. Dr X made a note in my medical file that Louise was to be the only nurse permitted to administer my injections. I know she did overtime in order to accommodate me when I had late appointments. She always attended me, doing her best to make the treatments as painless as possible. It was also her who drained the cysts when Dr X could not do so. This occurred every two weeks, in order to control the swelling of my face and thus avoiding complications like my eyes swelling shut. I was very fond of Louise and of Dr X. Both hoped for my recovery with all of their hearts. More than a patient or a professional challenge, for them I became the embodiment of suffering. They quickly got attached to me.

At 16 or 17, I finally got my first Accutane® treatment. It lasted 4 months. It was serious – Dr X took this course of treatment very seriously. I had to follow a strict regimen which included blood tests every two weeks. The result: no improvements. NONE. The verdict: I was part of very small percentage of patients for whom the treatment has no impact, and demonstrates no effectiveness. Later we tried the treatment a second time. It lasted a whole year with no improvements or change.

In total, I had five Accutane® treatments, some of which lasted for

two years. Through Dr X, I was introduced to every single innovative product which was marketed in Canada and in the United States. He was always looking out for new products that could cure me, which was his ultimate goal.

I also had use of a small device named Zeno, which was used to burn off pimples and cysts as they emerged. I had laser treatments too. I was also one of the first patients to receive “Blue-Light” treatments. These treatments forced me to remain in absolute darkness for a period of 48 hours following the sessions. Failing to do so could scar my skin permanently. I recall these treatments as being a key moment in my acne saga. While the cysts that I subsequently had were smaller, I began to have white pimples and pustules which I had never had before. My acne got altered. According to Dr X, the pustules were easier to control than the cysts and were less damaging to my skin, leaving fewer scars or other signs of damage.

As was often the case in my life, things could not be that simple. I had a lot of pustules! In fact, I had so many that I had to take a leave of absence from work for a whole month, in December 2006. I had so many pustules that I had difficulty talking. My face was so swollen! I was so hideous! My face was red and infected. The pustules leaked when I spoke. As you read this...you must certainly have a disgusted expression on your face. Am I right? I understand. Not only did I have to live with the disgusted looks of others, I also had to live with my own disgust towards myself.

I remember this moment in my life. In the week preceding my leave of absence, I had organized several projects for the students at my school, such as Christmas donations for impoverished families and a taste-testing of local produce for students in need. To this end, I had to meet people to try to obtain sponsors for these activities.

This face of mine had plagued me for so long. Nevertheless, I went in to work every morning through sheer courage and strength of will and thanks to my profession, which I treasured so much.

In that same period I had to contend with the fact that a man that I had loved very much had decided to end our relationship. After all, what choice did he have? I felt so ugly and he was so gorgeous! Also, I could no longer stand other people's glances. I used to go out with a scarf over my face to conceal as much as I could of myself. He claimed that he was not leaving me on account of my appearance. I never really believed him. How can you dream of kissing a woman whose face is covered with pustules? How can you be proud to introduce her to your family or friends? Perhaps my self-image had altered my perception of these events. Who knows?

I also recall having to address many students in the school auditorium. I remember the courage that it took to do so -- courage that I sought deep inside. Once again, I covered my face with a scarf under the pretense that I was cold.

Frozen in my memory is the recollection of meeting my soon-to-be ex-boyfriend

at a restaurant. I had chosen a table located in the darkest area of the restaurant so that he would not be able to see me too much. I remember that I could barely maintain eye-contact with him. The next day, I met Dr X. I recall seeing the compassion and tenderness in his face when he saw me seated in the waiting room. He had Louise take me at once to another room, where I burst into tears. My father who was accompanying me that day, also cried. I believe that it was because he felt powerless to help me. Without a word, Louise wrapped her arms around me and held me tightly. On that day, Dr X made no jokes. As I began to talk, Dr X had his back to me, I quietly said: "Dr X ...it hurts. I can hardly move my lips to speak. I don't want people to see me. I no longer believe...it's too hard. I wish I could disappear."

He sighed deeply and turned towards me. He looked me in the eyes and said in no uncertain terms, "Absolutely not. I will cure you. First, you'll go home get some rest and gain some energy and strength back."

He handed me two pieces of paper. One authorized a leave of absence for one month, but which ended up being six weeks on account of the Christmas holidays. On the second slip of paper there was a prescription for a massive dose of Accutane®. In addition, I had to take another medication to fight the pimple eruptions which were certain to occur right after the first Accutane® intake. Yet another medication was needed, so that I would not be poisoned by the ensuing infection covering my face. The resulting cocktail: 9 pills daily!

For the first time in my life, at age 31, I abandoned a principle that I had held since beginning to suffer from acne;

namely that I would never runaway and hide – never! On that day, I thanked him for the time off and the chance to hide. It was too much. Everything was unbearable. I started the Accutane® treatment once again in December 2006 due to the acne. I stopped in February 2008 because my skin was now flaking off in alarming quantities. My skin became so dry that it fell-off in pieces and in bits. The flakes on my shoulders were not dandruff; it was all the skin from my face. Furthermore, the side effects of Accutane® became intolerable and eventually I required testing due to the onset of bone growths on portions of my spine.

I remember when my daughter's hugs & kisses hurt my skin. It was a difficult emotion for a mother to bear. Back then, my friend Claudine had spoken about her esthetician. Claudine claimed that this particular esthetician was exceptional and trustworthy. In fact, my good friend had shared my story with this esthetician. Claudine is one of the many people around me that never got discouraged and who searched for solutions to my problems when I was too helpless to do so. According to her, this esthetician was moved by my situation. Claudine had explained to me that the esthetician would treat me under the two following conditions:

- 1) I had to purchase all the products she suggested and use them as instructed;
- 2) I had to stop taking my medication.

I hesitated for a long time before accepting her offer. I simply couldn't picture myself not taking medication.

For the major part of my life I had chosen to use medication as a solution

to my acne. Moreover, I must admit I doubted the effectiveness of topical creams. I had invested so much money – as had my parents – and had tried so many different brands, that trying another seemed pure lunacy. To me, creams were simply useless. Finally, I acquiesced and to stopped using Accutane®. Its side effects had been numerous and quite unpleasant. I had reached a point where I was simply devastated by he ineffectiveness of the treatment. Claudine tried once again to convince me that I had nothing to lose by seeing her esthetician – after all, I had stopped using the medication anyways.

I simply had to make an appointment with her esthetician...Claudine wouldn't let go!

This is how I met you, Marlène, on a sunny day in April, in your office, telling my story once more and crying all the while. There are some people with whom we bond right away. There are people who are by their very nature sources of inspiration. They provide hope and light to others during their darkest moments. For a long time Dr X was such a person for me. On that April day you took up the torch and provided me with renewed hope and a reason to believe and have faith again.

Filled with skepticism, I abandoned my skin to your care. I adopted the Nelly De Vuyst product line with a touch of irony thinking mostly about the hole it made in my budget. But you convinced me to follow this treatment, and so I did. I had, from the depths of my soul, the desire to be beautiful and you, Marlène, know how to reach the woman in every girl. You have the ability to make people feel beautiful just by looking at them.

You seem so confident. People are right: you are a witch...our beloved enchantress! Was it only Nelly De Vuyst's magic or your unshakeable confidence! I do not know. What I know for a fact is that I can't remember when I last felt beautiful, or when I didn't get up in a rush to run and hide in the washroom filled with shame. Before you, I couldn't recall when I last left the house without make-up or flirted so much with my reflection in the mirror. Today I am writing these words to spread the news to you and to all the professionals like you who work for the cause of women's beauty, to let you all know that you have contributed to change my life.

I can finally blend the feelings of well-being and pride with the person I became through my suffering. Today, I am a fulfilled woman. I can now say that I feel as beautiful on the outside as I do on the inside. I didn't believe that I could ever feel this way.

Every single day, I realize how fortunate I am and I thank you for it. I also thank you for having given me new wings on the eve of my 34th birthday, giving me a chance at a new life. I had given up. I was down. You brought me back up. I thank you also for that. I thank you for having imposed a new life style on me. Thanks to you and to the numerous products which have had a positive effect on my skin, I now make it a duty to invest at least 20 minutes a day on myself and my skin.

I look forward to having my skin pampered by your skilled hands. These are memorable moments of relaxation, in the frenetic pace of everyday. We should all experience such quiet moments more often.

At home, I now take time to savor the moments when I remove my make-up and apply the creams. I am now sensitive to their texture, to their scent and to the positive outcomes of using them. I now make time to take care of myself – something which too few people seem to do nowadays.

You encouraged me to make taking care of myself a personal duty. You instilled in me the notion that I should take time to pamper myself, to spend time in front of the mirror with my lotions and brushes and simply feel pretty. All the credit goes to you – as I now take good care of myself. I revived the pretty woman that was hidden inside me. You helped me rediscover the pleasures of being in touch with my skin. You allowed me to appreciate all the changes which occur and to accept the imperfections. Imperfections which are now taken less seriously.

Marlène, you often told me: “ *Do not look at the pimple, Caroline, look at what is all around it. You are radiant!*” Today, I smile when I look at my daughter dolling herself up, next to me. She plays at applying lotions in front of the mirror. She mimics applying cream to her skin as I do it to mine. What a great lesson to learn from your mom – to learn to make yourself beautiful.

Before I conclude my story, I want to share some optimism with you. I hope that people who suffer as I did, will hear you say that it is possible to be cured.

Who knows the joy of sleeping-in and breakfasts-in-bed in good company? Who allows herself to answer the door without make-up? Who can enjoy the

feeling of a gentle breeze on her cheeks while strolling on the beach? Who knows the pleasure of swimming, head in the water, not worrying about the make-up fading? Who smiles proudly addressing a class filled with teenagers without being concerned about her image? Who is delighted about her looks and shares this new happiness with all her acquaintances and friends? Who now feels the softness of hugs and kisses without having to fear to be embraced by her child? Who, for the first time in her life, initiated the Christmas-cheek-kissing ritual?

Well, it's me,

Caroline