Everyone has them. Some are plainly evident on a person’s skin; others are hidden from view inside our own bodies. The way I see it, there are two kinds: psychological and physical; and each individual wears them differently. Returning soldiers hide their scars from loved ones for fear of showing weakness; victims of unfortunate accidents embrace them as seen with the survivors of the Boston Marathon Bombing. Scars are the leftovers or aftermaths of injuries, the reminders of what we have endured up to this point. I have some too, five to be exact. One left me with a slight fear of sharp objects for a period of time; another made me wary of the combination of downspouts and bare feet. Two more impacted the sports I played with one of these ending my high school basketball career. My final scar is the one that I am most afraid of. Was I expecting this scar? Nope. Did I think it was possible for me to acquire this scar? Ha! Not in a million years. However, I did and to explain this scar I should start at the beginning.

Let me start by saying this: I am an athletic person. I love sports and have been around them my entire life. Seriously. My dad coached basketball and I entered the gym at a mere two weeks old and never left. Weeknights were filled with watching basketball, football, hockey, and sometimes baseball after all homework was finished. Tuesdays and Fridays were the best days of the week because that meant going to the gym to watch my dad coach. So naturally when I grew up I played basketball among many other activities. When I reached middle school I chose to stick with only two sports: golf and (wait for it…) basketball. Looking back, I can honestly say that I couldn’t play basketball to save my life. I mean I’m surprised my coaches even put me in the game. But it wasn’t until eighth grade that I realized (quite forcefully if I might add) that in order to play the game I loved I would have to work extremely hard. I didn’t have any natural talent. None. Zilch. Nada. Goose egg. And so with many, many frustrated tears shed (think crying a river… times two) I set out to improve. Long story short it paid off. I was pulled up to junior varsity my sophomore year and steadily improved from there. So this is where my scar story begins: Senior year. The BIG one. Top dogs in the school. My last basketball season playing for my school.

I was at a fall ball tournament, getting reading for the start of the season, which was only one week away. A few of the regular girls couldn’t make it so I was asked to fill in (slight offense taken but I got over it). My thoughts about being there? I had nothing to lose, at the very least I would get some running in before practice so I won’t completely keel over and die on the first day. I can’t tell you whom we played, the score, or how the game was because well frankly I can’t remember. However during the beginning of the second half I was chasing an opposing player down the court and we ended up in the left hand corner of the court (my back was to the baseline). The girl passed the ball and I scooted up to guard her. She faked to my right and started towards the baseline on my left. I remember thinking about how my head coach would yell if I let her drive the baseline. I shuffled towards my left with the intent of guiding her (more like pushing but hey it’s basketball and no foul was called) near the out of bounds line thus trapping her and making her give up the ball. (Huzzah! Defensive stop for me!) On my second step to my left, my foot caught on the ground and I lost my balance just enough for her to gain an advantage. Not wanting to be beaten, I try to catch myself before I land on my butt. But alas that’s not what happened. As I tried to regain my balance, my left foot remained caught on the floor and the rest of my body continued to move to the left. I felt this intense pressure in my knee, similar to the pressure felt when one tries to pop a stubborn knuckle or any other joint just before you succeed. Then I felt/ heard a pop, again similar to the sound of a popped knuckle or clucking your tongue against the roof of your mouth but multiplied by 10. Then I was suddenly bombarded by a wave of pain more intense then I have ever felt. I gasped, crumpled and landed in a heap on the floor. My first thought was, “Holy man! What did I just do to my knee!”

My second thought was, “Dear God please don’t let me have blown my knee!” My mind doesn’t even register the spectators right in front of me until I hear gasp.

“Oh! Andy!” another parent and volunteer coach for my high school team exclaimed.

My dad, who joined me on this little excursion, looked up from his phone (seriously?! and adults say that teenagers are bad!) gasped and flew to base line right in front of me. It is at this point that I realize how serious my injury is. For the record my dad never gasps. And if he does, it’s because a computer is falling to the ground or coffee is being spilled before he has had time to get his daily caffeine fix.

I see my dad crouching and I say the first thing that comes to mind, “ Daddy! Help me!”

“I’m right here,” he says.

It is at this point that I have no choice but to sit and wait for play to stop. I’m hoping for sooner rather than later. In all this time (about 10-15 seconds) I haven’t looked at me knee to survey the damage that I have caused. Part of me is hoping the damage is internal so I don’t have to see any carnage like the Kevin Ware leg break. I decided to look for the briefest of seconds. What I see astounds me. Where my kneecap should be there is just skin, and on the left side of my knee there is a huge bulge that is sooo not supposed to be there. I look away and grimace through the pain. A random thought pushes its way through. It’s a fact I read somewhere only a few days before: swearing when injured can help reduce the pain.

“Really? Does it really work? Please work. Here goes nothing,” I think.

And holy crap it worked! And they say your not supposed to believe everything you read.

While all this commotion was going on I was patiently waiting for play to end whimpering through the pain. I was waiting with breathless anticipation to hear the whistle that signaled when help could be given. I don’t know how long it was; I was rather busy at the moment, but before, where there were dozens of legs surrounding me, there was nothing. Apparently when the whistle blew the other players looked around to see why the whistle blew; and when they saw me they high tailed it to their benches and hid their faces so that they wouldn’t have to see my knee anymore.

The athletic trainer and my dad landed down by my legs and the trainer started firing off questions at me.

“What is your name? Is a parent or guardian with you? How badly does your knee hurt?”

I answer all of these questions through gritted teeth and lie on my back. She tells me I have dislocated my kneecap and a bunch of other stuff that is a blur. Then she says that she needs to slide my kneecap back into place.

“Whoa! Wait what? You wanna do what to what?!” I think to myself.

She goes on to explain that she will push against my kneecap while at the same time straightening my leg. She gives me the count, “One… Two… Three”.

I clamp my mouth shut against the pain as she slowly mends my disfigured knee. And before I know it my legs looks like a leg again. Now I don’t remember this part, but according to my dad, and he would know he was right there, as the athletic trainer was replacing my kneecap I hit the floor three times with my fist. When my kneecap is back in place, all I feel is pain, sharp throbbing pain. I’m carried to the end of the bench where the trainer continues to talk to me, probably making sure that I am not going to pass out. I am forced to wait until the game is over, which means I have to sit on the bench for the rest of the second half. The game ends (finally!) and I get to leave. There were super short munchkin-sized crutches that were futile to use, so I was carted, on a huge janitor flatbed cart, into the elevator and out the door to our car to head home and to the hospital.

It has been some time since my injury, since the moment my basketball career ended. In the aftermath I received no surgery and only 5 months of physical therapy. I was able to warm up with my team for the last four games of the season including senior night; however, I never stepped onto the court as a true player. I was officially given a clean bill of health on our last day of practice. As it turned out, I never had a chance of returning to the court after that day. As I walked away from that injury I thought that I had only gained a scar that was hidden within my skin. I was mistaken. I wasn’t until my freshman year of college, in an introduction to Physical Therapy class, that I discovered my true scar from my injury. As part of the class, we were introduced to cadavers, bodies of those who have donated themselves to science after they have died. There were four groups, each with a different part of the body for focus on. Coincidentally I was placed in the group that was going to focus on the knee. Before she began, the instructor asked if anyone in the group had previously injured their knee or had knee surgery. And I, being the blonde that I am, raised my hand and talked about my injury. Huge mistake. If I could hop in a time machine or get my hands on a Time Turner I would not have said anything about my knee. My instructor proceeded to explain and demonstrate what exactly happened to my knee (she actually got it partially wrong for my specific case but I wasn’t going to tell her that). During her explanation, she said something extremely similar to what the athletic trainer had said to me when I injured my knee. The next thing I knew I was suddenly overcome with feelings of panic, terror, and being overwhelmed similar to what I felt in the immediate aftermath of my injury. These feelings were accompanied by nausea, light-headedness, and feeling really warm then really cold and clammy. In the end I almost fainted (and no this is not a case of PTSD, trust me it’s not). A few months later while watching a medical show with a patient who had a dislocated collarbone, I did manage to faint. And while it may seem like I need to go get psychologically evaluated, the truth of the matter is that this is my true scar from my injury. I may have escaped without a physical scar on the outside, but my true scar that resulted from my traumatic knee injury was linked to my brain. I do have a hard time seeing athletic injuries more so than before and I do have trouble thinking about what my injury meant in terms of what physically happened with my ligaments, tendons, muscles, and bones. This is a scar that I will constantly live with.

So to quote your teacher, “What did you learn? What have you taken away from this experience?” (I mean what good is a story without a lesson or bottom line). To these my answers are simple. From my experience I learned that injuries and traumatic events are never only skin deep. I learned that it is possible for even the most seasoned person to fall prey. I have learned that there is no clear or correct definition of a scar. But most importantly, from this experience I have come to understand what it truly means to be human. Before my injury I believed that I was strong, even invincible in some respects. I believed that I could trust my body and it would never fail me. But I was wrong. I have come to understand and value what I am able to do and what my muscles, tendons, ligaments, bones and etc. do for me. And because of this I will forever be grateful for my injury. I now have a greater respect for what I am able to achieve, perceive, and do. I understand that it is possible for something so strong and resilient to fail only to get back up and start again. That is the moral of my story. That is what I will hold on to for the rest of my life.