

# I Had an Eyebrow Transplant Four Years Ago, and I'll Never Touch Them Again

BY  
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PHOTO: RACHEL NUSSBAUM

Screw winter. Because, as we all know, with winter comes dry skin. Dermatologists beat it into us: The dry, cold winter air sucks moisture out of your skin. For most people, that means use lotion. For me, it's like a horror movie. The cold weather kicks my seborrheic dermatitis out of remission, and for those who don't know what that is, imagine dried Elmer's glue coating the skin under your eyebrows. Here's the short version of my life for the last eight years: Girl gets skin condition; science knows nothing. Girl has a kind of picking-specific OCD that causes her eyebrow hairs to fall out—permanently; science knows nothing. Girl demands what science *does* know; girl gets eyebrow transplant; girl admits science knows one thing. I'll explain.

Eight years ago, at age 17, I was visited by the lifelong specter of seborrheic dermatitis. Derms and researchers still don't know exactly why or how it happens, but it's caused by your immune system overproducing skin cells in certain areas. Everyone responds differently to different treatments, so the only thing to do is trial and error every possible solution.

*Scales, flakes, lesions*—every word that's used to describe "seb derm" sounds like a medical textbook. But none accurately paints the picture of what happens. So again, picture dried Elmer's glue, or the light blue lichen that grows on tree trunks (here's the [Google Image](#)). The skin version lives on my eyebrows. To other people, it looks like dandruff flakes that haven't yet risen. To me, it looks like catnip—flakes waiting for me to dig my nails in and pick them off. And I love, I mean, *love* to pick.

Writing this feels like pouring out my guts and throwing my large intestine onto the screen, because talking about addiction is difficult beyond words. How do you explain feeling out of control in your own skin, and being the one to cause your own pain? You're the bad guy; if only you could have the willpower and self-control to walk away. But addiction doesn't feel like a matter of willpower, or right or wrong. It's a primal, deep-down urge: Feel your eyebrows. Find a mirror. And when I do pick, God, it feels incredible. It's pure bliss, an instant-access flow state that calms my heart and quiets my mind (present tense, because it never really goes away). I can breathe, I have a single-minded goal: Get rid of the flakes. They shouldn't be there.

The psychology is easy. It felt like a problem I could fix, even as the aftermath turned me into a wreck, because brow hairs were coming out with every flake that I pulled, and still, I couldn't stop. Picking, which I did to the point of making myself bleed, was a brief reprieve of focus and control—even as it left me crying, eyebrows raw and inflamed, hating myself and the way I looked. A skin disorder and a skin-picking condition—the irony elbows you in the face.

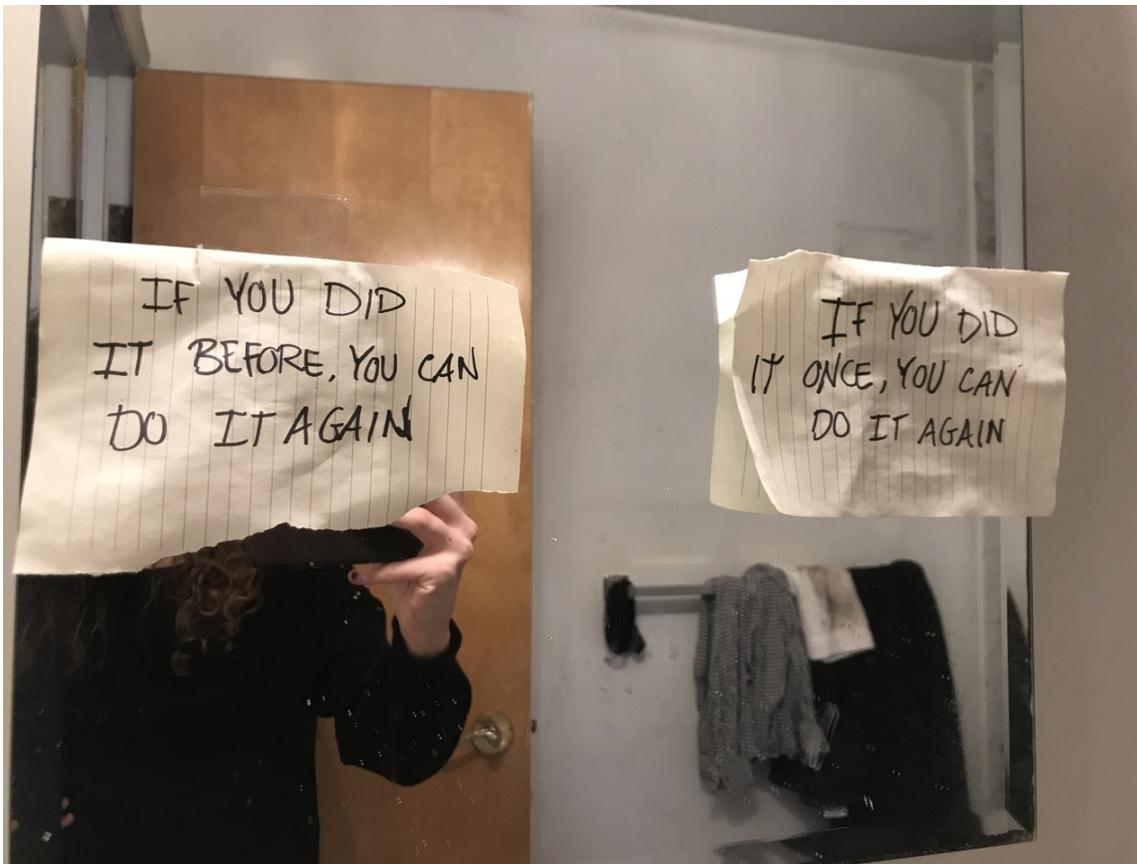


PHOTO: COURTESY AUTHOR.

I keep these on my bathroom mirror to remind myself it's possible to stop picking (and serve as blinders). Sometimes they work.

## Remission

In 2010 seborrheic dermatitis was a tough nut to crack, and it still is. Desperate to find a cure, I saw dermatologist after dermatologist, each one recruiting other staffers to discuss my life like a teachable moment. It took around a year to find a solution: a round of oral steroids that rebooted my immune system (which have since been taken off the market due to "potentially fatal liver injury," yikes), plus a prescription-only antifungal ketoconazole eyebrow wash that I still have to use daily, and an immune-system suppressing ointment at night. Every day felt like being trapped in a highly personal hell—and with doctors uncertain about the condition, it seemed like it might not ever end. That was a real option, and I have an indistinct memory of my mom telling me that I had to be more than my eyebrows.

During that time, I also picked at my brows nonstop. Back then, psychologists didn't know much about chronic skin picking. It went by "dermatillomania,"

although it's since been renamed to excoriation disorder, described as "a mental illness related to obsessive-compulsive disorder." Understanding it as OCD is helpful. I'd give anything to be able to go back in time to the one therapist I saw, who tried to give me other things to occupy my fingers with, and tell her to prescribe meds instead. Behavioral alternatives didn't do shit, so I came out the other side with sparse eyebrows, picked over and not growing from months of repetitive injury.

The tips, arches, and tails of my brows were hit hardest, with bare skin peeking through and only faint, thin, fine brow hairs left. After four years of filling in my brows with every option that Sephora had to offer, I was fed up, and I wanted the eyebrows that I would've had if illness hadn't taken them away from me. Every photo of myself that I took and hated, I blamed my brows, and myself—not just for picking them out in the first place, but for not filling them in well enough to make myself look "good." Every morning the pressure was on, which was horrible in its own way. Everywhere I went, paranoia felt like a string, a constant worry that my brows had "moved" or melted off. I don't remember exactly when I learned that brow transplants even existed, but in 2014 there was one doctor in New York who would do it. So the winter break of my senior year of college, I decided to take back the eyebrows I would have had.

## **The Transplant**

I'm incredibly lucky that my family could afford it, because insurance covered nothing, and it wasn't cheap—\$5,500 in December 2014. After a consultation about what I wanted and what he could do, I scheduled an appointment. When the day came, my mom and I showed up, went into the room, and without a word of warning, he took a pair of clippers and shaved a strip of hair on the back of my head. Like, c'mon. He had told me that was part of the process, but damn, it was abrupt. Here's the full gist, and a warning, because it's a little gory. Once they have access to that strip, they remove the skin and stitch it back up (you don't get that hair back, but my hair is thick and curly, so the absence isn't visible). Then they painstakingly transplant the follicles to your eyebrows by making small incisions and planting the follicles in them with the hope that they'll grow, which is basically the same technique they use in straight-up hair plugs, but on my face.

There's no guarantee which follicles will take, but when I saw myself afterward, all I could think was, well, this has somehow gone from bad to

worse. My eyebrows were red, puffy, and outlandish looking. I felt like Quasimodo, my eyes hidden beneath my swollen brow bone. My mom and I went home, and I cried for a week. Other than sitting and contemplating my despair, the work I had to do afterward was basically nothing—the follicles had to take, so I couldn't get my brows wet for a week (as in no showering), and I had to gently dab at them with a warm washcloth to get rid of any remaining scabs.

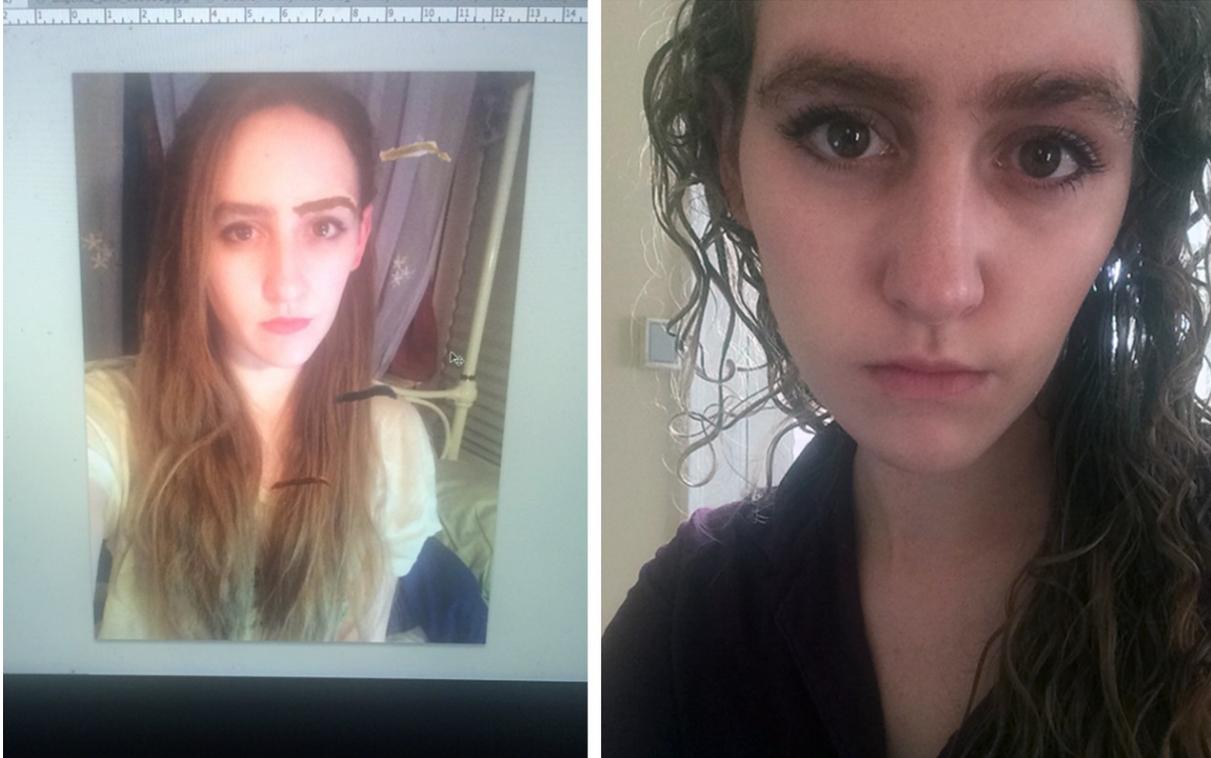


PHOTO: COURTESY AUTHOR.

Left: Trying on eyebrow shapes with the tech of 2014. Right: One week post-op.

## The Aftermath

After about two weeks, you could barely tell I'd had it done. The postsurgery swelling was gone, but I also had zero new hairs. Over the past four years, the hairs have grown in, and now I have legitimately full eyebrows. Since the follicles are from my scalp, they grow like the hair on my head would. I have really bouncy curls, which means every few weeks I have to trim them with nail scissors to keep the hair looking like eyebrows. Outside of that, I'm afraid to touch them. I'll still use pencil or pomade (this [\\$9 Dipbrow dupe](#) is my favorite), but when you pay close to \$6,000 for your eyebrows, you don't just stroll into a threader and let them have at it. You push away anyone who comes at you with tweezers.

To the surprise of probably no one, men are the only people who feel entitled enough to give unprovoked feedback on my brows (and only on dating apps, the idiots). But it's like people have said about life after shaving their heads—anyone who opens with a critical remark goes straight in the asshole bin, which makes things easier. Plus, I've got the ace card: Beyoncé's makeup artist once complimented them, so yeah, I'm fine. And thanks to the current push for full brows (and embracing who you are), the only other comments have been overwhelmingly positive. Getting them "shaped" is out of the question, but that's the one beauty experimentation I'm cool passing on. I've heard too many people regret the nineties.

Was the transplant traumatic? Yes. Was my eyebrow odyssey drawn out and all consuming? Totally. I have no regrets about doing it, but like I began this piece, screw winter. Because every winter, the flakes and scales come back, and it's a toss-up whether they'll go away when the weather settles. And for those uncertain weeks, I'm back at square one. Helpless to myself, prying up the flakes, and again losing eyebrows in the process. Over the past few years, researchers have drawn the connection between excoriation disorder and OCD, so at long last I'm starting treatment. It feels like facing a dynasty of fear, helplessness, insecurity, uncertainty, and self-loathing. But I do have great eyebrows. At least for now.

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