

Karl Meade

# Thin-Skinned

This is my daughter at five: the precocious naturalist in a pink, flowered swimsuit, her blue eyes wide and pleading. “Dad, why can’t we walk around naked outside?”

Behind her, out the west window, the sun has half set behind a treed hill, like a diamond over her shoulder. “Because we’re a sensitive species, honey. When we go out into the world, we have to protect ourselves.”

“From what?”

“The Earth.” I don’t mention other humans. I wave vaguely into the ether. “The elements.”

She isn’t convinced. She’s at that age of dawning realizations: that I’m not exactly a normal father, that other fathers and mothers don’t wander the hardwood wearing anything but spectacles. She waves a tanned limb, imitating me. “But the Earth has a skin too. The crust. And we’re part of the earth.”

For this, I thank David Attenborough. She goes on: horses, rabbits, apples, chickens, snakes, our dog—none of them wear clothes.

“They have *fur*, honey. Which we humans gave up a long time ago.” This gives her pause—perhaps trying to picture an apple with fur. I fill the pause with a teaching moment: how we’re born naked and open to the world, and in order to survive we slowly close ourselves off—to protect ourselves—but that the key to living a rich and meaningful life is to remain open, despite all that we suffer.

Her supple skin stretches across her lovely cheekbones—her first yawn not brought on by sleep. She’s growing up before my eyes. I’m proud but also dead serious: How can I teach her to protect herself without closing herself off?

This is me at fifteen: straight-A hockey star with dozens of friends and my first true love, living in idyllic small-town Nova Scotia. We move to big-city Ottawa. Within months I'm cut from three hockey teams, failing school, and no one talks to me. I become the sullen, acne-faced loner. I can't get out of bed. Every morning my mom lays her hand on my forehead. I have no fever, don't throw up. She takes me to the doctor. He calls it *mono*. Two weeks later he calls her stomachache *cancer*.

I turn inward: smoke pot, skip school, spiral down. One winter afternoon I stand at a busy intersection in the flat light, my body full of lead: school, hockey, no friends. I breathe the words into the air: "What is the point?"

Transit buses whistle past two feet from me. I have the clearest, giddiest thought I've ever had: *Just one step, it would be so easy. The lead will lift, I'll float into the ether.*

I take a breath, lift my foot, and recoil backward into the person behind me.

I'm lucky the bus scared me. But I still can't face the world. I learn to subjugate myself—my opinion, my stories, my jokes. It's my way to hide, to not step forward and say: *This is who I am*. I want to fit in. I learn to use wit to protect myself. From the outside, I look thick-skinned but on the inside is all fear: rejection, humiliation, of being alone. Slowly it seeps into my belly and becomes part of me. I live on guard, braced for impact. For decades, for life.

Earth, apple, human: Daughter teaches father. Her words lead me to the Internet. It turns out we all have nearly identical ratios of "flesh" to skin thickness. The world seems designed to be thin-skinned. At least at first. But wouldn't she be better off thick-skinned from birth rather than follow this tortuous path of thickening: from the joy of her first step to the pain of her first skinned knee; from her first words to her first rebuke; her first tooth, her first cavity; first friends, first betrayals; first crush, first rejection. All this before even reaching her teen years.

As someone who deserted myself as a teen and never forgave myself, who am I to teach her to stay open? I see now I should've taught her to toughen up.

Because at thirteen it seems so easy for her to pierce her skin.

I know a lot of thin-skinners. We're drawn to each other. We recognize the thin veneer of survival. We care too much about what others think. I tell myself this is

not weakness, that it's the basis of civilization, that the alternative is a society of sociopaths. But it doesn't help.

This is my friend at twenty-nine: Harvard grad, played varsity hockey, works for a good company, two beautiful kids. His forehead is a wondrous cliff of stone. He looks like a model; his wife *is* a model. He should be thick-skinned. And yet here he sits in my back garden, hunched over, shattered, unable to lift his head to look me in the eye, rolling a shred of napkin between his forefinger and thumb, trying to squash his pain into a tiny ball that he can flick away.

We're living in Holland, the land of the thick-skinned. He's the too-sensitive Canuck, getting beaten down. It's not your fault, I say, or their fault. It's what happens when you jam the entire population of Canada into the space of Prince Edward Island. Like living in an ant colony: You step on each other, get over it. Taking casual offense from another human is a luxury we can't afford.

Two months later he stands miraculously straight and looks me in the eye.

"I had to take on the first-strike mentality!" he says. "Enter the room with guns blazing. I was getting ripped to shreds."

I'm happy for him but saddened that the gentle, philosophical, self-effacing man I love has had to pull the curtain over.

My mother dies when I'm seventeen. At her open coffin, I wait until I'm alone with her and then lay my fingers on her forehead as she did to me. Her skin feels so cold and firm, a surge runs up my throat. I nearly vomit and shove it down with a cough. My dad rushes in. "I'm fine," I say. On the way home in the car, my fingers rest on the cold, firm armrest. I slide my hand into my pocket.

I don't cry on the anniversary of her death. I don't cry when our eighteen-year-old dog dies two years later. I swallow it whole, become the good son, look after my dad, go to engineering school, and join a big company.

Little do I know that it will take twenty years to start to peel off the layers, to come back to myself. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones because I stepped back from that edge. My fear saved me and gave me the gift of return, unlike so many others. And my daughter: She's the one who sent me on this journey, trying to take the seatbelt off, to "unbrace" myself.

And yet: At thirteen she cuts her forearms. At fifteen she runs away. At seventeen she's doing coke in her room. At nineteen I don't know where she is and don't

know if I want to.

This is the earth to a child at night: infinite and powerful and fierce. The wind, the sea, the mountains, the animals, the fear. But now we know just how delicate and thin-skinned she is, how we all are, holding on by the skin of our teeth.

This is evolution: four legs to two, hair to hairless, standing upright with our innards exposed.

Opposable thumbs—yes. But more importantly: do we close the fist or open the palm?

My friend Terry at fifty-eight: thick-skinned on the outside, sweet porridge on the inside. Some say his hard living was what killed him, but I know it was his thin skin. He cared too much about what others thought. He wanted to do the right thing but was scared to be seen doing it. Warrior on the outside, worrier on the inside.

They find him face down on the beach, sand in his mouth, dog at his side. At his open coffin, I squeeze his hand.

It's the pig that gets the bad rap. Yet another misunderstood thin-skinned mammal, just because they wallow in their own shit. I could learn from the pig: Have the courage to live in my own shit. Face the music, smell the truth, feel the pain. Breathe it in, breathe it out.

One midnight, living in Holland, at thirty-two: I walk around our back garden, naked. I'm reading too much Ondaatje. I'm In the Skin of a Lion, Running in the Family, Billy the Kid with my skin peeled inside-out in the desert, awash in the elements like a newborn. The slightest breeze an electric buzz, the first raindrops gentle caress. The slap on my ass for my first cry.

It's the night after we lost our unborn son at eighteen weeks. My wife is in bed, asleep on painkillers and grief, in a hole no one can prepare you for. They say it was a thickened septum in her womb that broke her water. We don't know what that means. All we know is we held our tiny son in our hands, his skin glistening in our palms, and there is no going back.

I come by it honestly: My dad was a suburban nudist, parading our hardwood in the buff. He loved to embarrass us in front of friends—“How about a big hug for Daddy?” Although usually, mercifully, clothed. He was one of the lucky ones: thin-skinned and thick-skinned. He cared what others thought but did what he wanted.

Last night my wife hardly slept. Not just because we don't know where our daughter is but because she felt guilty about pushing her way into the front of a photo. We'd asked our waiter to take the photo on the balcony of a hotel. My wife wasn't pushy; it was more like rushing to get into the photo before the waiter took it. But all night she felt like she'd pushed another woman into the background. In the morning I see my wife in the front of the photo, her hair blowing in the wind, looking glamorous, while the other woman peers over her shoulder, a tinge of red in her cheeks.

My wife looks beautiful in the photo but not the next morning, after worrying all night. This is the life of the thin-skinned, in the good sense: afraid you've slighted someone over the slightest slight. This is empathy, consideration, and reflection. Civilization.

It's not that I want my daughter to be thick-skinned. I want her to be so thin-skinned that she's porous. So that if her friend drops dead on a beach, if her mother takes her last breath within arm's reach, if her son loses his life before it starts, it will flow right into her. She will take a breath, feel her soul, feed her soul, and let it pass through her into the ether where we began.