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Eye of the Beholder

Jane McGowan

“**W**hat happened to your eye?” The little girl with blond, flowing hair stared back at me waiting for a response.

My heart skipped a beat like it has done every time for as long as I can remember being asked this question. It’s not as if I didn’t see this coming—this girl was the type of child that was always curious, incapable of standing still for even a brief moment, always bouncing. In fact, she had probably asked her mother as many questions today as she had breaths in her tiny body.

The summer of 2007, I was seventeen and just learning how to drive. I was taking a Driver’s Ed. class in a neighboring town with my twin sister and high school friend. We attended classes with a roomful of unfamiliar teenagers, letting the whir of the fan and the shuffling of worksheets capture our coveted days of warmth.

Our teacher was far from what you would expect to see at this type of school as this was where the wealthiest of our community lived. He was somewhere around his mid sixties with balding gray hair. He wasn’t particularly short or tall, but was more on the plump side. This was clearly his post-retirement job, teaching teenagers how to read road signs and putting his life in danger with someone nearly one quarter his age behind the wheel. This didn’t seem to faze him—he had probably had plenty of worse students before us. We shared our driving sessions with three other students, every once in a while, doing a Chinese fire drill so that the next person could have their turn at the next railroad track or speed bump.

It was a balmy summer and depending on where you sat in the car it could end up being very unfortunate. We would drive with the windows down and often our teacher would rest his right arm on the window of the passenger’s side. Depending on the wind conditions that day, you may or may not have gotten

a whiff of stale air sitting in the back passenger’s seat.

And so the classes dragged on, week after week. During one class we were talking about pedestrians and our teacher said, “Now remember when you’re walking you shouldn’t be listening to those things you have, what are they called...those iPads or whatever.”

The entire class burst into laughter; he had meant iPods. The iPad hadn’t been invented yet, so to us it sounded like Apple’s version of a feminine hygiene product. *Line up at your local grocery store for the new iPad, now with maximum absorption and mood swing protection like you’ve never seen before!* We never imagined it would exist one day; we just thought our teacher was coo-coo for cocoa puffs. Little did we know he was a modern day Yoda.

But what happened the day everyone rushed to the Apple store to get their brand new iPads? What did they find? A product that had virtually the same function as the iPod except with a different, decidedly sexier look. And that’s how I’ve felt my whole life, like an iPad living in a world of iPods. People don’t know that people like me exist in the world until they catch a glimpse of me on the streets, in a mall or in line at Disney World. Functionally I’m like everyone else, but on the outside I look different.

I was born with a condition called Hemifacial Microsomia, leaving the left side of my face underdeveloped. This included my jaw, eye, ear and facial muscles. I’ve had reconstructive surgery to build an ear, even out my jaw and put in a cheek implant. I have a scar that runs across my head from ear to ear where surgeons went in to adjust my eye socket. What that translates into is I can’t focus on pictures in newspapers, 3D movies only look 2D when I put the magic glasses on, I hate the game Telephone, and if you try to scream my name from across campus I won’t know from which direction you’re coming from, due to a loss of what I like to

call echolocation, which all you super humans have. And you better believe I'm not getting in a pool as soon as the name Marco Polo is mentioned. Instead of the girl with the pearl earring I'm the girl with the cool hearing aid and at the age of 23, I still don't look like an iPod.

That summer I also began to expose my grandma status to the general public by securing a job at Wegmans, a highly praised grocery store in the northeastern United States. I was looking forward to having my very own job for the first time, though I can't say I was the best person suited for cashiering. Throughout my life I had been pegged as the quiet girl, the girl who everyone thinks they can crack and bring her out of her shell. I've been jokingly called a troublemaker by teachers and students alike for so long that it falls flat like a month old two liter bottle of orange soda and I have a hard time choking it down. I'm the girl who's stuck between "Miss I-bring-all-those-boys-through-my-line-with-my-hair-flipping" and "Mr. Macho-I'm-too-cool-for-this-job" who are incessantly flirting with each other as I desperately try to lure customers into my line to stop the continuous flow of hormones that just happened to come in the form of Axe body spray that day. And then it always gets worse, either one side or the other has to bring me into the conversation to be an accomplice to the flirting.

"He's being a jerk, right Jane?"

It seems to me the general public's primary tactic to get a quiet girl to talk is to have her agree with them on whatever topic they're discussing with someone else. Don't ask her about her life or interests; just have her agree with your opinion so that you can feel like you 'included' her in the conversation. And so I defiantly respond with, "Sure." I'd follow that hair flip all the way to China before I'd get caught up in that game.

Cashiering was a difficult job in part because carts were always squeaking by, people were talking a mile a minute, and the beeps from the scanners were always in competition with each other. But it was also difficult because I felt exposed. I had to talk to numerous strangers a day letting them see for the first time something they might not have known existed.

"Were you burned?"

"Were you in a car accident?"

"What *happened*?"

"Well, let's see...I woke up this morning, brushed my teeth. OH, you're talking about my face, right."

I had to endure staring from children aging anywhere from birth to preteen years, exercising my Olympic gold medalist abilities in the art of staring contests. As ashamed as I am by this, I always breathed a sigh of relief if the child wasn't able to talk yet. All they could do was take in what they couldn't verbalize. It got me off the hook. I didn't have to explain my appearance. But even more alarming would be the adults who would avoid my gaze. Human beings long for connection and a huge part of that stems from eye contact. Being denied that basic human right is like being denied existence.

And then the small girl with the blond, flowing hair came through my line with her mother and her little sister who was sitting in the child seat in the front of the cart. They had a cartful of groceries and I estimated how quickly I could get them through my line without having "the talk". The mother, clearly exhausted, had allowed her two children to pick out a package of gum from the brightly colored display of treats present in almost every checkout line.

I scanned both packages and handed them back to each respective child and then the struggle of trying to open the layer of glossy plastic surrounding their sugary confections began. Because of the youngest child's proximity to the mother, she stuck out her hand inviting much needed help. The mother began to unravel the plastic while the older girl continued to struggle.

And so the little girl turned to me without hesitation, held up her gum and said, "Can you open this for me?"

Right away, I neglected the grocery mountain that had accumulated on the belt and turned to the girl and said my usual line, "Oh yeah, sure."

As I unwrapped the plastic covering my heart beat faster and faster, bracing for the moment that was inevitably going to come next.

Moments after I handed back the gum came the question that's been ringing in my ears since the day I was born, "What happened to your eye?"

The world froze as I tried to conjure up an epiphany response contrary to what I usually say. But nothing came and so I replied with, "Oh, I was born this way." I figure if it's good enough for Lady Gaga to write a song about, it's good enough for me. In fact, I'm pretty sure a check is on its way to me in the mail right now.

Dear Jane,

Thank you for letting me use your life motto.

Love,

Mother Monster

But it's never good enough for the children with whom everything in the universe has a reason, an explanation, a meaning. And so the girl looked up at me again and exclaimed, "But why?"

This time I didn't wait for the epiphany to come as I knew there was no easy way to explain why. What I have is not genetic, but a loss of blood flow to the left side of my face that occurred when I was in utero. Surely this was not a concept that a child could grasp. And so I responded, "I'm not sure how else to explain it other than I was born this way."

I felt my face flush as I allowed the barcodes of the Chobani yogurt glide over the scanner, unsuccessfully covering up the subpar explanation with beeps. Thankfully the mother jumped in to save me as she turned to her daughter and said, "Honey, we're all different."

The girl paused for a brief second and then turned to me and said what I hadn't known I was waiting my whole life to hear from the mouth of a child. Standing there in her tiny dress, her voice laced with conviction and love she boldly declared, "Well I still think you're pretty."