

## **My Previous Face**

I simply look ahead today. I ignore the stares, the awkward glances and the double-takes. Every escalator is a conveyor belt of strangers, all startled by the sight of me.

It probably sounds strange to you, but the way I carry my face, on the escalators, on the tube, in public, in life, changes. It's dependent on my mood. For many years, I would glance down, in embarrassment. Not just my own, but on behalf of unsuspecting strangers. I still do that nowadays, when I'm feeling down. You probably think I feel like that a lot, but actually, I don't. Perhaps more than you, but I think only marginally more. Mostly, I simply look ahead.

I am fascinated by the reaction of others. Of course, some people blatantly stare. Mostly older ethnic people, actually. I don't mean that in a racist way. I mean that in a that's-just-what-happens way. You probably think I would be offended, but I understand, I think. It's not discourteous. It's curiosity. Which is different. Not in outcome, but at the very least in intent, a lawyer might say. But, aside from the odd double-take, most people bounce glances off my face. They then stare ahead, rigidly. Frozen. They pretend not to have noticed me, with a kind of anxious nonchalance. That is the usual etiquette

in this scenario. It is accepted and has been agreed. It's actually quite amusing, but it's something that you will never know. You hope. I hope too.

But here's the best bit; sometimes I look *directly* at strangers. Sometimes I even ogle them. It's silly, I know. I swap roles with the public. Swap embarrassments without even telling them. It hasn't been accepted and certainly was never agreed. Not often; just when I'm feeling reckless or frisky. You know, happy just because. You probably think that doesn't happen to me very often, but it does. Like when it's finally stopped raining or when a really beautiful song on the radio lingers longer than it should. Or when I make a cocky man (who is really a scared little boy, in disguise) apologise.

I peer down the huge, cavernous platform, with its gawping mouth, always open. Like a perpetual scream. An infinite agony that I can relate to. It's decorated with posters and graffiti. Today, it's almost empty. A young man in a preposterous suit standing nearby is enchanted by his phone. Either that, or he is avoiding my face. We will never know. Either way, his suit is hideous (pot, kettle, black, I know). It's shiny and purple. I hope he is going to a wedding or a fancy dress party, but I know he's not. He has a beard. Everybody seems to have a beard, nowadays. When did *that* happen?

The whole tunnel rumbles in anticipation. Then the tube thunders past aggressively in a red and white blur. Then it relaxes, slows down, with more gentle clicking and thumping. Then it quivers and then it stops. I catch glances of my shimmering reflection in the windows as they jolt by. Yes, I'm still hideously deformed (just to be clear).

You're probably intrigued to know if I've become inured to my own image over the years. I think I have. I don't really see the monstrosity that others see. That *you* see. When your eyes dart up for a sneaky peak. I mean I *do*, obviously, but I also just see me. The outside of me. The inside of me remains undamaged, normal. If anybody is every really normal. I'm probably as normal as you. On the inside (just to be clear).

I have often wondered if that would have happened with Lana's beauty. If, over the years, I would have become inured to it. Maybe all of my awe would have run out one day. We will never know.

You might think that Lana was heartless to have left me, after it happened. My mother slipped me an aphorism at the time: "If she won't stand by your side now, she was no good for you. It would have ended in sadness". I disagreed, but at the time my face was covered with bandages and I was exhausted. A plethora of plastic surgery, strong painkillers and anaesthetic

hangovers will do that to you. I couldn't speak, so I didn't disagree. But it *did* end in sadness, I might have said.

Lana was at my bedside for a few weeks before she disappeared from my life and deformity crept in. You could argue that she owed it to me to have waited longer. Maybe after I'd gotten over the immediate shock. But then again, does anybody really owe anything to anybody? Also, it's been twenty years. The immediate shock has passed, obviously, but I didn't *feel* it pass. So when did it happen? How would she know? How would I know? What is the usual etiquette in this scenario? What is accepted and what has been agreed? These matters are confusing. So she just left. I couldn't stop her.

On the tube, I stand and let the vibrations of the carriage gently massage me. The lights above flicker, as if desperately trying to communicate some urgent message. A pretty young black girl wears headphones that look far too big. Phones and computers have shrunk before my very eyes, but headphones are getting bigger. When did *that* happen? She screws up her face and sings along melodically. Her voice is stunning, but the angry clanging of the tube keeps drowning her out. How rude.

A young blonde woman taps me on the knee. I looked down and she gestures with her hand, pointing at her seat. If William was with me, he'd probably snap at her. "He's not disabled. He's perfectly capable of

standing”. Something like that. He would be prickly. He’s always prickly. He gets angry on my behalf. He is haunted by his intense gratitude towards me and feels guilt, alongside his pity. *Because* of his pity, maybe. He misunderstands these emotions. When people misunderstand emotions, they feel anger by default.

I smile at her and say, “No, thank you, I’m fine”. She smiles back. I get dozens of smiles. Hundreds. I’ve developed an ability to know which ones are genuine and which ones are not. Hers is. The world likes to show me some kindness, sometimes. She knows I can stand. Obviously. It’s the only thing she’s ever seen me do.

The purple-suited, bearded man glances up from his phone at the young blonde woman. His eyes dart back to the phone, to me, back to the phone. One, two, three... quick peek back at me. That *always* happens. One hundred per cent of the time. I like to count it out.

“What happened to your face?” I spin around and see a little girl pointing at me. She had pigtails and a worn-out lion teddy bear tucked under one arm, twiddling its ragged tail with the other hand. She is not smiling, but she is not scared.

Her mother charges towards her and tugs her backwards, dramatically. She raises her eyebrows and gives me a mortified look. I get dozens of those too, as you probably assumed. Hundreds. “Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.” She says it three times. One would have sufficed. In fact, probably zero would have sufficed. She chastises the little girl harshly; partly in shame, partly theatrics.

The little girl asked me what happened to my face because she wanted to know. I would have told her that I was in a fire twenty years ago and was badly burned and almost died. Because that’s what happened. I would have asked her about her lion teddy bear. Maybe we would have had a conversation. But we can’t now. That’s the consequence of two (or arguably three) excessive sorrys.

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Every time we meet, William always picks the restaurant. To be fair, he always pays. “It’s the least I can do,” he will sometimes murmur. It’s an odd phrase. Surely the least anyone can do is absolutely nothing. You don’t know William, but he is the most brash, disinhibited person I have met. So humbling him is fun.

Today, I barely step foot into the restaurant and he bounds over, kisses my face (hideously deformed, just to be clear) and gives me a crushing hug. He always holds on for a little too long. I don't mind, of course. But he is not exaggerating his affection. It's important that you understand that. It's because it reassures him, I think, that I, his guardian angel, truly does exist. A bizarre moniker, I know, but he *actually* called me that once, when he was drunk, in a restaurant, not too dissimilar to this one. The next day, he phoned me to apologise. He didn't want to offend me. I understood. In fact, I found it oddly amusing. Enjoyable, even. "Sorry. Sorry. Sorry," he said at the time, his head bursting with hangover and regret. Zero would have sufficed. It's nice to see him squirm.

The waiter is overbearing with his niceties; his smiling, his nodding, his mini-bowing, the way he furrows his brow when he answers William's query about the specials. As if William has asked him a sensitive question about geopolitics (not just to regurgitate a short list of food he has memorised). The waiter's niceties are because the restaurant is so exclusive and posh. It's not about my face. I get dozens of niceties. Hundreds. I have developed an ability to know what they are about.

I ask for a coke. The waiter flinches; infinitesimally, though I detect it. He places a heavy velvet-bound book with gold tassels, in front of me. He does this with two hands, slowly. As if handling a dangerous explosive, rather

that just a drinks menu. I obligingly flick through the exotic sounding beverages. I ask for a coke.

I look around the vast restaurant for the first time. The ceilings are high, and I feel like I'm in a castle. The lamps are red, wiry and unnecessarily intricate. The walls are peppered with small shelves with a variety of white clay ornaments. They are...well... fine, normal, pretty good maybe. Ornate? You probably know adjectives for these types of objects, but I can't think of any. The wall behind us brandishes several old black and white pictures. In one, a couple are embracing, but in a manner so formal and with smiles so forced, it looks positively unromantic. The man has a particularly vacant, gawking look. In another photo, a woman sits unnaturally on a horse with an artificial pout (the woman's that is). A sad old lady in a dark dress and an unusually tall hat glances solemnly out of another picture frame. Why so sad? She may have her reasons, but I bet they aren't as big as mine.

The restaurant is empty. The chairs look too big and decorated with too much sparkle, betraying its otherwise classy endeavours. There are only a few scattered couples. They seem to be concentrating on their food intensely, perhaps to distract from the lack of conversation. The restaurant is nevertheless loud. The clanging commotion in the kitchen echoes across the immense open space.

William updates me on his life. It's always so exciting to hear about it when we meet. Like binge-watching a soap opera. He's short but very well built. His muscles eternally bulge through his sharp tailor-made suits (today, light-blue pinstripes). Even in casual attire, his clothes always seem to be battling to contain his bulk. His hair is thinning, jet black and slicked back. He has a long face. I must admit, he does look bullish, but I'm able to see the hidden kindness. Perhaps nobody else sees that in him, but I definitely do. It's one of the things that makes me unique (not the most obviously thing, obviously). His face doesn't define him. That's something we have in common.

William is shockingly honest. What he lacks in diplomacy, he makes up for in temper. This must annoy those close to him; colleagues, family, supposed soon-to-be-wife, but it also makes him a successful stockbroker. More importantly, it makes him an enchanting author of his autobiographical soap opera. I tune in to this month's episode with glee.

He's practically given up on asking me about my life. He's tried so many times over the years but I give him nothing. He might think that I'm too private or maybe my life is too dull to warrant a commentary. The truth is, I like hearing William talk. It's amusing. It's exhilarating. You might say I

live my life vicariously through him. I don't know about that. All I know is that I cannot allow him to leave. Not like Lana.

Since I last saw him, William has bought a Ford Mustang, crashed it within a week and has been punched by a bouncer. He is in the middle of a story about a drunk stripper, who has been locked out of her house, when agitation and distraction creep into his words. He looks across the restaurant over to an elderly couple. He tries to carry on with the story but his face reddens. He clenches his fingers together and wriggles them.

Twenty years ago, when I ran back into the blazing building, it was technically me, but it also wasn't. I wasn't inside my body. I was floating above, looking down, enthralled by the glorious yellow and orange flowery flames, relentlessly engulfing the whole edifice. Whilst somebody else controlled my body, kicked down the door and ran through the flames. Somebody else saw the small boy, his soot-covered face, cowering in the corner of the room, petrified, clenching his fingers and wriggling them. Somebody else bounded heroically over the flames, licking maliciously towards the little boy. Somebody else picked him up and held him tightly and felt his scrawny arms grip with surprising force. Somebody else heard him whisper that he needed to find his transformer, to rescue it.

But it was me, inside my own body, badly burnt body, scarred-for-life face, who was given the George Medal. It was me, on that stage in the county hall, next to the Mayor, whom I had never met and have never seen since. I was in my fancy-dress mummy's outfit (the day before Halloween, as it happens). It was a floaty affair, with my painkillers. Dream-like, you could say. Strangely enough, my previous life seemed then, and even now, more dream-like. Jogging along the canal every morning. Bringing Lana tea in bed with various faces painted on her toast in jam. Phoning up my father with the sole purpose of mocking him, every time Liverpool lost. Driving in early every day for work to avoid traffic on the M25, and rewarding my efforts with a peaceful, skinny, hazel-nut cappuccino at the service station, and a twenty-minute slice of a novel. Escalators being a conveyor belt of strangers, all indifferent to the sight of my previous face. Every aspect, all like a dream.

I wasn't sure if I really deserved the medal, if somebody else did the deed. A feat of unfathomable sacrifice, apparently. Well, those were the Mayor's words. But since someone else wasn't turning up, I accepted it. That is the usual etiquette in this scenario.

Lost in my thoughts, I barely register William leap up from the table, utter profanities and belligerently walk over to the elderly couple. I only hear snippets of his tirade; the bits he yells extra loud: "Don't you know it's very rude to stare?" and also "That man is a hero!" I am drawn to the elderly man's dormant gawking look. It seems familiar, somehow.

You probably think William is a horrible person, if you are a colleague or family or a supposed soon-to-be-wife. You might be right, but you'd also be wrong. William is a scared boy, seconds from death but worried about his transformer. He is an adolescent, a young man who has always wanted me in his life and has demanded... *fought* to make me welcome and to make me important. He might be a cocky, brash, arrogant stockbroker (in a nice suit) but he is also a young, determined boy who insisted I attend his eleventh birthday party, that year, and every year since. Despite the comments; loud and quiet, in whispers and in secret, that all his friends made. Despite the looks (and more importantly, the lack of looks) that his friends' parents gave me when we cut the cake. He is the boy who cried incessantly and threw everybody out of his house on his twelfth birthday, when I didn't show up.

He wants me around for *me*. Not as some kind of trophy. It's important that you understand that. He rarely tells people how we met or how we know each other, how our lives became intertwined, in destiny forever, one night amongst those glorious yellow and orange flowery flames. When people ask, he just says we're friends. If they probe further, he repeats it sternly. "I just *told* you, we're friends!" Like that. Vexed by the insinuation that our connection needs further explanation. Offended on my behalf, even though I'm not offended.

We need each other. And he does owe me. I'm sure you'll agree.

He even broke off his relationship three years ago to his supposed soon-to-be-wife because of a comment she made to him in private, about me. I know, because she blubbered an apology down the phone to me. She asked me to talk to him. To change his mind. After all, he respects me, she pointed out. I considered it. But why complicate things? This way, William and I have something in common.

He sits back down and sheepishly stares at his starters (correction; 'entrees' here). He humbly mumbles something and I ask him to speak up, even though I can actually hear him. William explains that the couple were examining the photo on the wall behind me. I look up at the picture and back at the couple across the vast restaurant. Trapped in the frame, their younger smiles are so forced, it looks positively unromantic. In real life, their smiles are genuine and unforced. I ask William to go back and properly apologise. He flinches; infinitesimally, though I detect it. His body battles to contain his protestations on the inside, just as his clothes battle to contain his bulk on the outside.

I see him walk over to the mini-bowing waiter with excessive niceties, then gesture over to the couple. They both shake William's hand vigorously. I presume he has bought them exotic-sounding beverages, because out comes

the heavy velvet-bound book with gold tassels, handled with two hands, slowly.

Perhaps nobody else can expose William's humility. It's one of the things that makes me unique (not the most obvious thing, obviously). And frankly, it amuses me. It makes me feel reckless and frisky. You know, happy just because. Like when rain stops or when songs linger.

You might think that I regret going back into that blazing building while my whole life was outside waiting for me. My previous face. Jogs. Toast. Peaceful, skinny, hazel-nut cappuccinos. And Lana. Beautiful Lana. You might think that I regret bounding heroically over the flames to the little boy with the soot-covered face, scrawny arms, surprisingly forceful grip and a little whisper. I understand why you might think that. But you would be wrong.