

Scathed

I have to leave my house today. Out in the public, exposed. You probably are curious to know what it is like for me. Imagine you were forced to walk around naked for an entire day. It's a bit like that, but every day. I am weaving through the dingy tunnels that make up the London Underground, and I am simply looking ahead. Every escalator is a conveyor belt of strangers, all startled by the sight of me. I ignore the stares, the awkward glances, the double-takes.

It probably sounds strange to you, but the way I carry my face, on the escalators, on the underground, in public, in life, changes. It can be affected by my mood, just like my mood can be affected by the weather. You know, like when it has finally stopped raining, and the world smells fresh, because it has just been washed.

For many years, literally and metaphorically, I used to hold my head downwards, in embarrassment. Not just my own, but on behalf of unsuspecting strangers. On *your* behalf. I still do that sometimes, but only when I'm feeling down. You probably think I feel like that a lot, but actually, I don't. Perhaps more than you, but only marginally. Mostly, I am simply looking ahead. Mostly, I am inside my old world, and sometimes it smells fresh. Sometimes, I forget to feel vulnerable. But luckily, those stares, awkward glances and double-takes are there to remind me.

I am fascinated by the reaction of others. Would you believe that some people *blatantly* gawp? I mean they actually ogle! Mostly older ethnic people. 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. 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 look straight ahead. Rigid. Frozen. Like they are in the army and I am their platoon leader, marching past, inspecting them. *Atten-hut!* They pretend not to have noticed me, with a nonchalance. A very anxious nonchalance. That is the usual etiquette in this scenario. It is accepted and has been agreed. It's actually quite amusing for me, 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 them, swap embarrassments. 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 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 station platform. Its tunnel is a gawping mouth, always open in a perpetual scream. An infinite agony that I can

relate to. It's decorated with posters and graffiti. Today, the platform is almost empty. The commuters have already commuted. The rat race has already started without me. London is standing around the proverbial water cooler. I don't really know how jobs work nowadays, what offices look like. My face was not exactly left employable, after what happened happened. On a couple of occasions, I have been offered a token charity role, by people who want to make themselves feel better about what happened to me. No, thanks.

A young man with a pony-tail, 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. He has a beard. Everybody seems to have a beard, nowadays. When did *that* happen?

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

You probably are 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* see it, obviously, but I also just see me. The outside of me. The inside of me, my world, sometimes fresh, sometimes just washed, remains

undamaged. Unscathed. 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 for her would have run out one day. We will never know.

You might think that Lana was heartless to have left me, after what happened 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. Unscathed. 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 for what I did. He also feels guilt for what I did, and pity too, even though he refuses to acknowledge it. These emotions are complex and convoluted. They mix together and accentuate each other like ingredients of a stew. 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, whether recently washed or not, 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 Mississippi, two Mississippi... quick peek back at me. That

always happens, and would you believe it, *always* at two Mississippi. That must be how long neurone battle before curiosity defeats etiquette. 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, zero would have sufficed. She chastises the little girl harshly. Partly in shame, partly in 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 when what happened 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 mutter. 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 his guardian angel, me, 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 niceties. The smiling, the nodding, the 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 know.

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. Its purple shininess reminds me of a hideous suit I have very recently seen. He handles it with both hands (white-gloved, I should say), slowly. As if handling a dangerous explosive, rather than 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, too high and I feel like I'm falling when I look up. I hold my head downwards (literally, not metaphorically). The lampshades 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 photos. 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 picture, 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 frame. I wonder what her problems are and I bet they are not as big as mine.

The restaurant is empty, exacerbated by its high ceilings. I have an urge to stand up and scream, just to hear the echoes. It's silly, I know. The clanging commotion in the kitchen reverberates across the immense open space. I guess that will have to do. There are only a few scattered couples

dining. They seem to be concentrating on their food intensely, perhaps to distract from the lack of conversation. Perhaps that would have eventually have happened with Lana. We will never know

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. If he was a house, an estate agent might call it passion, but it *is* 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 squeezes me like a stone, but I relinquish no blood. He might think that I'm too private or maybe that 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 did, unscathed.

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 creeps 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 fists and wriggles his wrists.

Twenty years ago, when what happened happened, 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, 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 fists and wriggling his wrists. Somebody else bounded over those flames. Those malicious licking flames crawling towards that 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, very much scathed, scarred-for-life face, who was given the George Medal. It was *me*, on that stage in the county hall, next to the Mayor, with his ferocious handshake,

holding on for a little too long, exaggerating his affection. With his beaming smile, friendly, overly friendly, even though 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 *more* dream-like. Still does. Jogging along the canal every morning. Bringing Lana tea in bed with a smiley face painted on her toast in jam. Phoning up my father to mock 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, was all like a dream. Still is.

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 overly friendly 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 storm 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 vacant 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, later that year. And every year since. Despite the comments, 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. Anger by default. Complex and convoluted emotions, mixed together and accentuated, like a misunderstood stew.

And when he looks at me, he looks at *me*. Not with stares, awkward glances or double-takes. Just normally, like I had my previous face. Unscathed.

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

Three years ago, he even broke off his relationship to his supposed soon-to-be-wife because of a comment she made to him, 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. Broken off relationships.

He sits back down and sheepishly stares at his starters (correction, they are 'entrees' here). He 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.

He walks over to the mini-bowing waiter with excessive niceties, then gesture over to the couple. They both shake William's hand vigorously, but not ferociously, like a Mayor I met once (and only once). I presume William 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 over those malicious 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.